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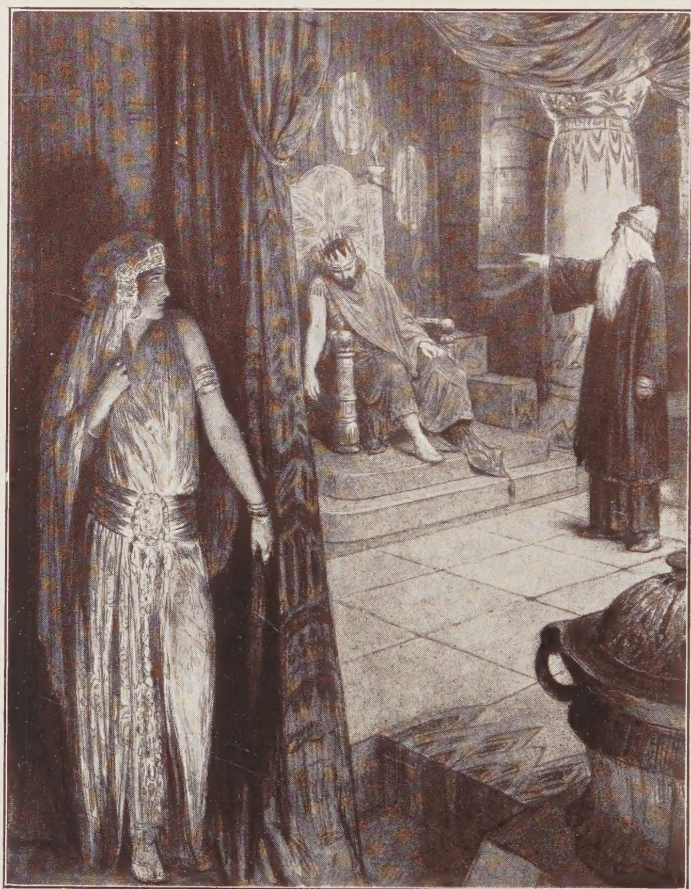


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FROM BEHIND THE CURTAINS, . . . BATHSHEBA SAW THE PRIDE  
AND ASSURANCE GO OUT OF THE FACE OF THE KING.

*(See page 34)*

# *Far Above Rubies*

By  
*AGNES SLIGH TURNBULL*

*"Her price is far above rubies"*—BOOK OF PROVERBS



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To  
the memory of  
my father,  
ALEXANDER H. SLIGH,  
and to  
my mother,  
CINNIE McCONNELL SLIGH.



## Foreword



THE Bible has always seemed to me the most fascinating of books, not only for what it tells but for what it refrains from telling. It leaves much to the imagination of the reader as it moves with stately terseness through its accounts of love and battle and intrigue, through its chapters of prophecy and poetry and miracle.

Especially is this true of its references to the women who come and go across the old Hebraic stage. I have wondered deeply about them. What of their motives? What of their inner joys or their heart-break? These are not given by the masculine narrators. They lie, somewhere, far beneath the calm surface of the record.

It is for this reason that I have attempted, in this volume, to interpret what might have been the moving forces in the lives of Bible women. It seems almost too daring a thing to do. And yet, I



believe it is right to assume that these women of the long ago reacted to the great crises of their lives as women do now, and as they will continue to do to the end of time.

So I am sending out these little stories, in the hope that they may take nothing away from the beauty of the old, familiar narratives, but may, perhaps, add something of freshness and reality to the characters and scenes around which they are woven.

A. S. T.

*Maplewood, N. J.*

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By J. Simont

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*I*

*THE HEART OF BATHSHEBA*

*“And one said, Is not this Bath-sheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite? And David sent messengers and took her.”—II SAMUEL 11: 3, 4.*

# I

## THE HEART OF BATHSHEBA



SPRING had come to Jerusalem. A sudden, warm breeze had touched the sleeping gardens and the almond trees had sprung into blossom. Even on the hills about the city, a gentle quickening was abroad, for masses of scarlet anemones and crimson poppies flamed now where a month before had been only rocky slopes. And in the outer fields the barley and wheat were already beginning to head.

For winter and the rain were past. It was the time of year for flowers and the soft call of the turtle dove; for the tender perfume of the budding grape-vines, and,—for kings to go forth to battle.

There had been this year, as usual, in Jerusalem the flare of banners, the sound of trumpets and the tread of strong men through the streets. Israel had gone forth to make war upon the Ammonites and to capture their stronghold of Rabbah, city of waters. But this time David, the king, had tarried behind in his palace. Joab had captained the

host, with David's thirty-seven picked men as leaders.

And of these valiant ones, none had gone forth with a braver, truer heart, nor a stronger arm to guard the Ark of the Lord and fight the battles of his king, than Uriah, the Hittite. And none had gone forth more beloved. For in the little home that stood almost within the shadow of the king's house, dwelt Bathsheba, his bride.

It had been a hard parting, for Uriah loved as a strong man loves. The wild, free vigour of his boyhood amongst his own people in the South; the hard stress of the later years of daring exploits and nights in the open field, of intrepid assaults and bitter struggles,—all this had become concentrated into a passion as powerful as his own resolute nature, as tender as that inner chamber of his heart that opened only to Bathsheba.

Bathsheba, of the timid, trusting dove's eyes! Of the rippling flood of golden-bronze hair that seemed too heavy for the small, exquisite face beneath it! Of the laughing lips and tireless young limbs! Bathsheba, of the white soul and gentle heart!

It had been, indeed, a painful parting; for they had lived in the little house only half a year. But Uriah had long before yielded his life to the service of his king; he prized the honourable place he had won among the valiant ones; he admired Joab with all the intensity of a seasoned soldier's worship of

his general. He was a warrior and battles must be fought!

Bathsheba, too, had been brave though her eyes were misty. Her father Eliam and her grandfather Ahithophel had gone forth each spring as Uriah was going. From childhood she had heard nothing but the business of war; of the might and valour of King David. She knew by heart the stories of his mighty men: How Adino and Eleazar and Shammah had each, single-handed, been victorious over companies of Philistines; how three of the thirty chief ones had fought through the enemies' lines at night, burst through the garrison at Beth-lehem, and carried back to King David the cup of water for which he had longed; how Benaiah had slain the lion in the pit one snowy day; how he had wrested the spear like a weaver's beam from the powerful Egyptian and then killed him with his own weapon!

Great, dauntless men! Invincible! But in her heart Bathsheba knew that the noblest, the most loyal of them all was Uriah, whose mighty strength became the weakness of love at her slightest touch; whose powerful hands, hardened from grasping the spear, trembled with tenderness as they smoothed her hair; whose eyes that flashed response to the call of Joab, grew dim with utter adoration when she lifted her face to his.

And on her part Bathsheba poured out from the treasures of her girlish heart, long motherless,



such a wealth of love that Uriah became to her. life itself, the very reason for her being.

For three weeks now Bathsheba had been alone in the little house, but she had been neither lonely nor afraid. Old Abigail who lived next door watched over her as Uriah had begged her to do, and besides, was she not in the very shadow of the palace of the king, himself?

On this day there was spring not only in Jerusalem but also within her heart. She had felt as she woke in the morning that strange joy that suddenly strikes youth when the air and sunshine have in them the sweet thrill of new life.

She had sung blithely as she ground the meal for her breakfast cakes. How little it took when Uriah was away! She had run back and forth in the small garden, exclaiming to herself, laughing aloud in her delight. For the peach trees that grew around the little pool which Uriah had built for her, were a mass of pink bloom!

She drew the boughs down to look at the miracle. How sudden it seemed at the last. Bare branches one day and in an incredibly short time a cloud of flowers! Bathsheba drew a breath of rapture. So with other things! She and Uriah just themselves now in the tiny house. Then some day little faces about them, little feet in the garden, little hands pulling at the peach boughs!

In the fond, secret delight of the thought she ran under the trees, peered into the pool, then circled

about in an abandon of boundless hope. What a happy day! She would plant a great bed of lentils by the farther wall. She would set out the two little fig shoots old Abigail had promised her, to surprise Uriah when he came home. A happy day!

She ran back to the house and caught up the water jar. She would go clear to the well outside the gate this morning. On the way she chatted with the other women going for water. She laughed gaily and pointed out to them the scarlet patches of anemones on the hillside.

She sang again as she swept out the house; she ran eagerly over to old Abigail's and bore her back along to watch the planting of the lentils and the fig shoots.

The bright afternoon waned. Sunset came. Bathsheba prepared her evening meal. Then she stood by the window and looked upon the tent where the Ark of the Lord was accustomed to rest, and offered her evening prayer.

She prayed for the peace of Jerusalem and the prosperity of all that loved her; she prayed that Jehovah would stretch out His arm and give victory over His enemies; she prayed for David, the conquering King, the sweet singer of Israel, the Lord's Anointed; she prayed for the safety of Uriah. Though a thousand should fall at his side and ten thousand at his right hand, she besought the Lord that death should not come nigh him. She prayed that Jehovah would be gracious and

make her as a fruitful vine; that children like olive plants might be round about their table. And then from the holy place of her heart she added that other petition that every woman in Jewry hushed her very breathing to utter: she prayed that God in His great mercy would look upon His handmaiden and grant that of her, or of her seed, the Messiah should be born!

It would soon be dusk now. She must look once more at the peach blossoms before she closed the door for the night. She ran out swiftly. The little garden was full of perfume. She stooped under the low boughs and stood beside the pool that Uriah had built for her pleasure.

She slipped off one sandal and touched the water gently with her foot. It was warm! Warm enough to bathe in. The peach trees shaded the pool from the street. She threw off her outer robe, leaving the short, sleeveless tunic. She shook her hair about her shoulders. She felt like a happy child.

She stood in the pool and dashed the water over her face, her neck, her bare white arms. Then she tossed it over the peach blossoms, laughing as she did so. She showered her hair about her, then lifted waves of it on her arms like wings. Such a happy day!

At last she stepped again upon the ledge, put on her sandals, threw her robe about her and started toward the house.

If she had raised her eyes above the low peach trees, she would have seen a strong, dark figure on the roof of the king's palace. It was watching her, strained, absorbed! Armies and kingdom alike forgot, it was watching her with the intentness of desire.

But Bathsheba did not see. She went into the little house and closed the door. It was dusk now. She lit the candle, shook out her damp hair, and sat down to her tapestry with a light heart. She would embroider until time to sleep. The tapestry was to beautify the room when Uriah returned. She sang softly as her skilful needle flew.

Suddenly footsteps passed the house, returned, stopped. Bathsheba raised her head in surprise to listen. A knocking at the door! What could it be? She caught up the candle and ran to the doorway. Two men stood there with faces vaguely familiar. They had a look of authority.

"Art thou Bathsheba, wife of Uriah the Hittite?" one demanded brusquely.

Bathsheba's voice sounded small and faint. "I am."

"The king desires to speak with thee at once. We are sent to fetch thee."

A fear, immediate and ghastly, pierced Bathsheba's heart. The king wished to speak to her, now, suddenly, at nightfall! Oh, it could have but one meaning. *Uriah!* David had received news of the battle. Uriah wounded, Uriah dying, Uriah

*dead. . . .* God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, be merciful! Spare him . . . *save him!*

With a quick movement she put out the candle and threw it from her; she sprang from the doorway.

"Oh, *hasten,*" she cried to the messenger, who had fallen back, as though surprised at her swift compliance.

A leaden numbness seemed to weight her limbs and yet they bore her on. *Uriah, wounded, in need of her!* Oh, she would start that night; she would go to meet him. Perhaps the king would give her a guide. She would nurse him back to health. He could come home and lie in the garden under the peach trees.

Uriah, *dead. . . .* God of her fathers, be merciful! It could not be. He was too strong, too brave! She loved him too well.

She glanced at the men beside her. There was a strange smile, half pity, exchanged between them. Ah, they knew! They could tell her now. But better to hear it from the lips of the king himself, whom Uriah had loved and served.

They had reached the outer gate. They were now in the palace. They were going through long, dark corridors; through great, empty rooms.

Bathsheba was trembling; her breath came in gasps; her throat was hot and dry. It was rising over her again, that first deadly fear. The messenger had stopped before thick curtains. One

was drawn aside to allow her to enter, then dropped heavily behind her.

Like a frightened doe she sped across the tapestried floor, one hand clutching the loose robe to her bosom, the glory of her unbound hair streaming about her, her soft eyes beseeching! It was thus that Bathsheba fell at the feet of her king with her face raised like a white flower to his!

The sun rose the next morning in radiance above the Mount of Olives. It sent shining shafts to touch the Mountains of Moab and turn them to yellow and pink. It smiled upon the blue calm of the Dead Sea. It woke the drowsy flocks and the kneeling camels that waited patiently for the morning just outside the city wall and brought back to the labours of the day the sleeping shepherds and drivers, who, wrapped in their rough skin cloaks, waited with them.

It flamed golden above Jerusalem, over the women grinding in the doorways, over the men going forth to their work.

The golden light flooded the little garden of Uriah the Hittite, bringing new tints to the almond blossoms and fresh perfume to the peach trees. It brooded upon the lentil bed and upon the tiny pool. It seemed to linger, waiting.

But within the house there was no sound of happy song; there were no light feet running to and fro; no bright head bent above the mill in the



doorway; no laughing eyes turned toward the garden.

Instead there lay prone upon the floor a slight form that sometimes moved or moaned as if in dire distress, and in the soft white flesh of the extended palms there was blood where the nails had cut.

For in the darkness of the night before, King David had once again gone forth to battle. Not as against the hosts of the Ammonites or the Philistines! A solitary giant had opposed him, stronger than Goliath, invisible, terrible! King David had warred against an evil desire in his own heart and had fallen defeated before it! The conquering king of Israel had been vanquished by the dark enemy of his own lust!

And to the little home where she had sung her happy songs in the morning, Bathsheba had returned in the bitterness of her despair, as a helpless flower stricken by the breath of his passion; her trusting, innocent soul rent with shame, her white honour, her priceless treasure, stolen by him for whose cause at that very moment, Uriah was loyally risking his life.

But the great course of the sun is not altered by the agony of a single soul. Morning and evening, sunshine and starlight succeed each other with an indifference highly remote, yet not without its vague comfort that the foundations of the earth still stand.



Something in this quiet procession of nights and days, of steady up-springing in the garden, of familiar sounds in the streets, brought Bathsheba back finally from her first blank horror of unreality to a dazed acceptance of continued life.

She went about the old duties like a mute shadow of the creature she had been. There had been at first a longing for Uriah. She must go to him—he must come to her—she must share this ghastly secret with him, and receive comfort. But that would mean revealing the perfidy of his king whom he had loved. It would mean the breaking of his loyal heart. She must be silent, at least for the present, until her brain grew calmer and wiser.

So she became dumb to the garrulous solicitude of old Abigail who watched her white face with anxiety; dumb to the women in the streets when they tried to gossip and laugh with her as usual; dumb even to Jehovah, for her prayers turned to ashes upon her lips.

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem? When almost in sight of the Holy of Holies where dwelt the cherubim, this irremediable evil had been done to her and to Uriah?

Pray for the Lord's Anointed? She shuddered.

Pray for the safety of Uriah? When she feared he would choose to fall by the sword rather than share the secret she kept in her bosom?

Pray for . . . At thought of those other tender petitions, she sobbed aloud.

So the weeks passed on until there fell upon Bathsheba—swiftly like added blows upon a body already broken, the last sorrows.

There came the day when she knew that beneath her heavy heart there beat another, not her own. Oh, mockery of her sweet hopes! Oh, blasphemy of her most holy prayers! Shame upon shame! Anguish upon anguish!

There came the day when out of the desperate struggling of her soul, one duty had arisen. She must tell the king. She sent the brief message with one of the palace guards and then waited hopelessly. From somewhere out of the black void must come counsel, guidance, or she would die.

There came the day when a letter was delivered into her hand. She opened it slowly, then cried aloud for joy. She pressed it to her lips, her bosom. It was the writing of Uriah!

“Beloved,” it ran, “the king hath sent for me to inquire of the battle. He hath been gracious, granting me to go down to my own house. But how can I do this thing? The Ark of the Lord and Israel and Judah abide in tents. My lord Joab and my fellow soldiers are encamped in the open fields. I cannot rejoice while they suffer. Thou wouldst have me be strong and not weak. So I have but looked upon the house and the garden and dreamed that thy dove’s eyes are looking into mine. I go at sundown by the southern hill to carry back a

letter to my lord Joab from the king. Wilt thou be upon the roof that I may have one sight of thy face, my beloved? Soon I shall return to be with thee.

“URIAH.”

Light out of the darkness! Even the dead characters on the bit of paper seemed to take life and become the face of Uriah, tender, protecting.

She could hear him speak the words. Her heart thrilled at his fine honour. How like him it was. He could not rejoice in his home while his comrades faced death and discomfort. So he had made the hard decision. In spite of her longing for him and her urgent need of him, there was a quick relief that it was so. He would go back with a high heart. He had looked upon the house and the garden in bloom; he would see her waving from the roof. He would go back to his post of duty in the joy of his strength, hopeful, confident. It were better so.

And then the glad reality that she was to have even this one distant glimpse of him, swallowed up all else. She brushed and rebound her hair; she put on a fresh robe. In two hours she must be upon the roof. She ran to the garden and broke a spray of almond bloom, with which to wave to him. An hour before sundown she was in her place.

At last she saw him, a tall, strong figure on the

crest of the hill. He stopped. He had seen her. He tossed his arms in the air, joyfully. In one hand gleamed a roll of white. The letter to Joab from the king!

Bathsheba waved her almond branch. She held out her arms to him. The tears streamed down her cheeks, but Uriah could not see that. He could see only the quick, bright movements of her hands, her body.

Then, with a final farewell, he turned and sped out of sight. Bathsheba stood, watching the empty hill until darkness fell.

And then at last came the day when there was a sudden knocking again upon the door. This time it was an army messenger. She knew this at once by his dusty clothes and the spear at his side. A calmness stole over Bathsheba, that cold calmness that envelops a soul in its last extremity of pain. She heard the words in her heart before the lips of the messenger formed them.

Uriah the Hittite was dead. He had been shot from the wall as the Israelites approached the city of Rabbah. Joab had sent the report of the battle to the king.

Bathsheba came back into the room and sat down. She made no outcry, shed no tears. Instead, there came into the soft dove's eyes a stony look. Hard lines settled about the tender young mouth; a haggard look crept into the white face. For in Bathsheba's brain a hideous suspicion was

forming, was growing. Bit by bit, there was pieced out the proof until it had reached certainty.

The king had not answered her message to him. Instead, he had summoned Uriah and had sent back with him *the letter to Joab*. Uriah had been shot from the city wall. Therefore he had been in the forefront of the battle—and his regular place was in the second line.

Moreover, since Abimelech had been killed from the wall at Thebez, the king had ordered that the army should not approach so close to another city since it meant wasteful death to the foremost soldiers. Uriah had told her that.

Yet now, Uriah had been *shot from the wall!* And Joab had sent the news of the battle to the king! *The letter!* She could see Uriah wave it joyously to her. He was bearing to Joab the letter of his death. Against the stainless honour of Uriah's life there flamed luridly the infamous treachery, the heartless, calculating cruelty of the king; against Uriah's high, unselfish devotion, there stood out the servile, plotting falseness of Joab!

And into the gentle soul of Bathsheba, the iron entered. She raised her hands untremblingly to heaven. She swore by the God of her fathers that she would avenge the death of him she had loved.

The little house of Uriah, the Hittite, was empty. The lentils had long since sprung up in the garden

but the weeds had choked them unheeded. The peach blossoms had fallen, the green leaves had come, and now the fruit, but there were no hands to gather it except those of old Abigail who sometimes stole through the wall to look sadly about and shake her head at the mysteries of life.

Bathsheba dwelt now in the palace as the wife of King David. In those black days following the news of Uriah's death she had foreseen the events that would befall and had steeled herself to meet them. When the formal period of her mourning was ended, she had been taken to the royal house. She had made no resistance. Who was she, a woman, weak and alone, to resist the king of Israel!

Besides, the first vague thoughts of revenge had now taken definite and permanent form. They had crystallized into a plan, an act. But it was not yet time for its fulfilment.

So out of the dancing, sunny, trusting girl who had been the Bathsheba of the little garden, there had grown the unsmiling, silent, watchful one, who was the Bathsheba of the palace.

She wore costly garments now: the finest of fine linens, jeweled robes, bracelets of gold and sapphires. Her room was carpeted and hung with tapestries and Tyrian purple. Around the ceiling ran a border of lilies, carved exquisitely out of the cedar wood. On the table stood a bowl and a candlestick and snuffers of pure gold.



She was attended by a train of maidens as she moved, stately and aloof, to her bath, where perfumed waters lay in a great marble basin around which stood twelve pillars with wreathed pomegranates upon their chapters.

It did not seem possible that once she had stood in the tiny pool which Uriah had made for her, and tossed the water over the peach blossoms!

Sometimes in the quiet of the night time, when the darkness had shut away from her sight the rich and royal trappings of her room, she sat by the window pondering on all that life had brought her; the sin and the sorrow, and the mystery of Jehovah's dealings with her. And her heart grew ever more bitter. There was room in it now for but one refrain: *A life for a life!* Uriah should not fall unrevenged! But the time was not yet.

If the weight had not lain thus heavily, Bathsheba would have found much in the palace to rouse again her interest in life. There was the constant stir of great activity. As she went and came freely, as did all the women, she began to understand the manifold duties of the king.

Here before him from farthest Israel came men and women for special redress from wrong. Bathsheba clenched her hands as she saw them kneeling, explaining, beseeching aid. She alone, of all his subjects, could not lay her cause before the king!

To the court came young men, fresh and ruddy



from their flocks or farms or vineyards, eager to become soldiers, to achieve a place among the most valiant.

Thither came messengers of state from foreign rulers, oftenest from the king's great friend, Hiram, of Tyre. Then there were processions, and flash of royal colours, and feasting and loud talking in the great banquet hall.

But most frequently of all, there came to the palace the man of God, the aged prophet, Nathan. There was upon his face something which the soul of Bathsheba craved. There was peace and strength. His long beard shone white upon his black cloak. His noble head rarely bowed before David. He was the ambassador from a greater King

Once as he turned suddenly in the corridor, Bathsheba shrank away to allow him to pass. He stopped and looked searchingly into her face. He seemed to be reading her soul. There was accusation at first in his glance, but as her steady eyes filled and overflowed with misery, he laid his hand softly on her head.

"The Lord give thee grace, Bathsheba," he said, slowly.

Thereafter Bathsheba carried the words in her heart and watched always for the tall figure of the man who brought the word of the Lord to the King.

But oftenest in those days of waiting, Bathsheba,

always silent, furtive, mistrustful, studied the king himself,—David, the hero of Israel.

She watched his great body, the heavy arms, the stalwart limbs still lithe as those of a panther in spite of years of hard warfare. She watched his hands, strong, gripping, tense,—the hands of a fighter—as they caught a table or chair when a heavy mood was upon him; and then in a moment, hung with the long, sensitive fingers relaxed—the hands of a musician and a poet.

She watched his face, the massive, nobly carved features, constantly varying in expression; the cheeks still ruddy under the heavy, curling hair that was now streaked with gray.

She watched him closely from cleverly found hiding places, as he received the young men who came to offer themselves as soldiers. His face kindled with tender understanding as he spoke with them. For the moment he seemed again to be that youth of the beautiful countenance who had one day been called in from shepherding his father's sheep to be anointed for a life of high emprise; the youth who, confident in the might of his God and in his own clean, young strength, had gone boldly forth to meet and slay the giant.

She watched him when he settled serious matters of justice. He was the executive, the judge, the king of his people, careful and just and kind.

She saw his face flame with hate when news of

the movements of the Ammonites was brought to him. He became then the merciless conqueror, to whom the blood of his enemies was sweet. She thought of the two and twenty thousand Syrians overcome in the valley of salt; of the hosts of Philistines slain in the great battle that began over against the mulberry trees. She thought of the Edomites and men of Moab who had been forced to bow their necks to the rod of his power. She thought of all this and trembled.

But sometimes when Nathan, the man of God, talked with him, Bathsheba saw in the face of the king that other man, who, hunted as a wild beast in the mountains, yet would not raise his hand to harm the Lord's Anointed; that other man whom Jonathan had loved beyond the love of women, whom men now loved better than their own souls, asking nothing but to follow him, to die for him! The Man Magnificent!

Bathsheba pondered much on that man.

But it was in the evenings that she watched the king most curiously. When the early blue dusk lay upon Jerusalem, and the Mountains of Moab softly melted from rose to faintest pink, David sat upon the roof of the palace and played upon his harp and composed the songs which all Israel would sing after him. Bathsheba from her window listened and watched unseen as his fingers swept harmonies from the harp-strings and his voice rose, hesitatingly at first,—testing words, trying sentences,

then rich and assured as the poetry gained perfection.

*"When I consider thy heavens,  
The work of thy fingers,—  
The moon and the stars  
Which thou hast ordained . . ."*

Or perhaps,

*"Let my prayer be set forth before thee as  
incense,  
And the lifting up of my hands as the evening  
sacrifice."*

And often after sitting silent and relaxed for a little, his hands would move to an old, accustomed melody. He was reliving again the scenes of his youth. Bathsheba had learned to know this song best of all.

*"The Lord is my shepherd,  
I shall not want;  
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures,  
He leadeth me beside the still waters."*

She never waited now to hear the end of it. For something in it seemed to melt her heart, and that must not be.

She always turned instead to the thought of the king as he looked upon her,—that gloating, burning look from which her soul recoiled as from a branding iron. It was the look which had cursed her

life. Bathsheba thought of this and became strong again in her hate.

So the time of waiting passed, until on a bitter, gray dawn, the child was born, a frail, helpless fragment of life. Bathsheba's soul was rent between a fierce, maternal yearning and a shuddering repulsion. This child, her child, brought upon her again, overwhelmingly, the realization of the joys she had lost, and the ghastly taking off of Uriah when he had most longed to live.

As she gained strength to go about once more, her mind was busy upon the details of the act toward which her life had moved since she had come to the palace, and for which there was now no need to wait longer.

The place, she had long since decided upon. It should be when the king sat, bent over his harp on the roof in the darkness. So easy, so unbelievably easy, to steal from the chamber behind him and with one quick movement, still all the songs forever.

In the long hallway below there were racks of weapons—swords and spears and javelins. Bathsheba had often looked upon these. She had heard how once, long ago, David had escaped the sudden, hurling javelin of Saul. This time the javelin should not miss its mark. If her hand trembled, the thought of Uriah, brave, loyal, trustful, *shot from the wall in the forefront of the battle*, would nerve it again.

One thing only remained to make the revenge more sweet. The king should be confronted with his crime. So that at that last death moment, he might cower before the knowledge of his shameless guilt. Bathsheba pondered. Not from her lips could the denunciation come. They had been sealed too long.

But there was another who feared not the king; whose mission it was to proclaim the judgments of Jehovah; who had once looked upon her with compassion.

There came a day when Bathsheba made a quick decision. She threw on a dark cloak and a shrouding veil. She made her way out of the palace and on to the other side of Jerusalem to the house of Nathan, the man of God.

The prophet was standing before the window, eyes fixed on Mount Zion, the peace and strength of the eternal hills upon his face. He turned and saw Bathsheba, her veil thrown back, her face white, her dove's eyes piteous. He stretched out his hand and Bathsheba, grasping it, fell at his feet and began from the fullness of her heart to pour out the words which had never before been uttered.

She told of the little house and garden where she and Uriah had known the joys of love; of the black night of her defenseless shame; of her message to the king; of Uriah's coming and of his unselfish decision; of his return with the letter to Joab; of his death.



It was told. Bathsheba raised her head. The face of Nathan was working convulsively. A look, terrible in its righteous wrath, overspread it. His hands locked and unlocked. Then tears came to his eyes.

"Who shall interpret to man the ways of Jehovah! Or who shall reveal the counsels of the Almighty!" he said. "From the stem of Jesse shall come forth a branch; from the seed of David shall he come for whom all Israel waiteth! Thy sorrow may yet be blessed, Bathsheba, but thy bitterness shall not pass unheeded. Return to thy place. The Lord will prepare my heart ere I go to the king at sundown."

As Bathsheba passed quickly through the long hallway of the palace again, she reached for something that gleamed above her hand, and hid it in the folds of her cloak.

The day wore on toward the sunset. Bathsheba left the child in the care of its nurse and watched the street. At last the figure of the man of God came in sight, walking slowly, head bent. Bathsheba turned swiftly and made her way toward the audience-chamber of the king. A small room gave into it. Here, behind the curtains, she stationed herself. This was to be the beginning of the end.

David was alone in the great room. A parchment lay open upon his knees. He had been reading and his brow was calm, his attitude reposeful.

Suddenly from the wide hall doorway, approached the prophet. He gave no greeting, made no sign of recognition to the man before him. He advanced slowly, his white head now held high, his cloak still about him, his arms folded upon his breast. When he spoke, his voice was deep and sonorous.

“There were two men in one city; the one rich, and the other poor. The rich man had exceeding many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing save one little ewe lamb which he had bought and nourished up. And it grew up together with him and with his children; it did eat of his own meat and drank of his own cup and lay in his bosom, and was unto him as a daughter.

“And there came a traveller unto the rich man, and he spared to take of his own flock and of his own herd to dress for the wayfaring man that was come unto him. But took the poor man’s lamb and dressed it for the man who was come unto him.”

At first, David had listened, respectful, interested. But as the brief narrative reached its conclusion, his face flamed an angry red. The great veins on his temple grew thick. He rose from his seat, as Nathan stopped speaking, his body trembling with rage.

“As the Lord liveth,” his voice thundered through the room, “the man that hath done this thing *shall surely die!* And he shall restore the

lamb four fold, because he did this thing and because he had no pity! ”

For a second after the vehement words the two men stood silent, facing each other. The king, breathing heavily, dark with wrath; the prophet rigid, his still eyes holding David's blazing ones to his. Bathsheba gripped the curtains to her bosom to stifle her heartbeats.

Then Nathan took a step forward. He raised his right arm. There was the majesty of God in the gesture. The even tones of his voice cut the air like cold steel.

*“Thou art the man!”*

The king recoiled as though smitten. Bathsheba saw the anger, the pride, the assurance, go out of his face. She saw guilt and a great fear overcast it.

It was enough. The prophet was speaking again but she waited no longer. She had seen what she had longed bitterly to see. She had heard David pronounce his own death sentence. Could Jehovah Himself now question the justice of her act?

Bathsheba dismissed her maidens early and stood watching at the window, with the shining weapon in her hand. There would be a long interview, she surmised, between David and the man of God, then the king would sup, and then he would come upon the roof. She was ready.

At last a dark shape loomed in the opposite doorway. It moved heavily. It was David, bearing his

harp. Like a shadow, Bathsheba slipped from her room, through the passage, into the chamber through which the king had passed. She was at the doorway, tense, waiting. Her quick breath seemed to strangle her. Her grasp tightened on the javelin.

David sat inert before his harp, his great shoulders drooping, his face in the shadow. Suddenly his hands smote the strings, that answered with a crash, a wail, a cry. Then his voice rose, choked and broken.

*"Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy  
loving-kindness!*

*According to the multitude of thy tender mer-  
cies blot out my transgressions!"*

*"Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity!  
And cleanse me from my sins;  
For I acknowledge my transgressions;  
And my sin is ever before me!"*

Bathsheba trembled. Instead of the murderer who had sat in the king's high seat, who had gone his lofty way, regardless of the blood of Uriah upon his hands, here was a soul, stark and despairing, agonized, pleading before God. A king, prostrate, crying for mercy!

*"Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean;  
Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow;  
Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
And renew a right spirit within me!"*

To the stars, that anguished prayer for purity seemed to go.

*"Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, thou  
God of my salvation . . ."*

the straining cry went on.

*"For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it!  
Thou delightest not in burnt offerings."*

There was a futility, a helplessness in the voice, as though all the great resources of a kingdom were now of no avail in this extremity. Then the tones sank to a whisper. Bathsheba stopped breathing to hear.

*"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit!  
A broken and a contrite heart, O God,  
Thou wilt not despise!"*

The great body of the king fell forward upon his harp. Sobs rent it.

Bathsheba turned from the doorway. The stony deeps within her were breaking up. The hate which had wrung the very fibres of her heart, was relaxing, was freeing her from its grip. Old, tender emotions were slowly touching her tortured soul with healing. Pity came, and a high, gentle, resignation, that might some day become forgiveness.

She looked from the window. Over there under a faint moonlight lay the little house and garden. She gazed upon it steadfastly. The memories of the sweet life there, of her love for Uriah, must be sealed now deep within her heart. Never again could there be happiness like to that. The joyous girl who had known that blessedness, had died with Uriah.

Now a new Bathsheba, a woman, must try gropingly to learn the will of God for her in this new, strange life. Must become the mother of kings, and wife indeed to the Lord's Anointed, whose naked soul she had just seen. David, the merciless and merciful; the weak, the mighty; the base, the noble hearted; sinking in sin, then reaching up to touch the very hand of God! David, King of Israel!

And subtly there came upon her heart like the shining presence of an angel, the prophecy of the man of God: "From the seed of David shall come forth him for whom all Israel waiteth."

Bathsheba raised the javelin and flung it from the window to the garden beneath. She fell upon her knees and raised her white, hushed face to the starry heavens. Her lips moved.

"Behold thine handmaiden, O God! Be it unto me according as Thou wilt."





*II*

*THE LOVE OF PHARAOH'S DAUGHTER*

*"By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season."*

—HEBREWS 11:24, 25.

## II

### THE LOVE OF PHARAOH'S DAUGHTER



ERRIS, princess of the house of Pharaoh, sat very still in the high, carven chair in front of the low table in her toilet chamber until the last of her maidens had made the final slow, sweeping prostration before vanishing behind the thick curtains. Her face as she waited for their ceremonious departure was such as the fairest of the daughters of Rameses should wear: the delicate features were haughty, fixed, inscrutable.

She listened tensely. Long experience had taught her to detect, without turning her head, every soft movement of the maidens as they left; every noiseless settling of the heavy curtain whereon in golden splendour, the triumphs of her grandfather Seti were tapestried; every muffled, sandalled footfall from beyond, in the chambers of the waiting women.

At last she drew a quick breath of relief. She was alone. She was free. And as though the wand of one of the court magicians had passed over her face, it changed. The dark eyes be-

came luminous with eagerness; the thin, straight, crimson line that had been her lips, curved warmly, tenderly.

She raised the polished metal mirror. There might be one last touch which the maidens had neglected, which would make her yet more fair.

She took up the tiny brush that lay in the bowl of frankincense and smoothed again, lightly, the soft, straight, black brows; and added a little to the dark line beneath her eyes. Her cheeks were flushing richly at the quick beating of her heart. There need be no more vermilion. The lips? Scarlet enough, but oh, just the faintest drop more of the perfume of the lily from the alabaster bottle, that he might find them sweet!

She drew aside the clinging fold of her white robe. Her sandalled feet shone like two pink almond blossoms, so carefully the faithful maiden, whose duty it was, had polished the small nails and tinted the curving arches.

She stretched out her arms, softly rounded, exquisitely moulded. She had chosen the blue bracelets tonight to match the turquoise necklace. Could it be that he would have loved her better in the plain gold? But no, had he not once said that a blue flower in her hair was like the summer sky caressing the forests of Lebanon? She would wear the turquoise!

She pressed the golden fillet a little closer upon her dark hair, which hung in braids over her shoul-

ders, and in two small curls at either side of her face. A fresh lotus flower, twined in the fillet, touched her brow.

She rose to her feet, settled the jeweled girdle about her waist, and gathered the silken waves of the white scarf loosely about her.

Tum, the god of the evening sun, had already disappeared behind the great ships in the river, leaving their sails like white birds drowsily fluttering upon a coral sky.

In the sacred temple of Amon the priests were even now beginning to chant the evening rites; beyond the city, where all day long the sunshine played upon the little lake Thufi, shadows now were settling softly upon the tall reeds of its shore and reaching out with grey, caressing fingers to touch the lilies and papyrus flowers that lay upon its bosom.

A little fragrant wind blew up from the river. It was time.

Merris moved like a white shadow from the room, through the lesser hallway, on to the great Porch of the Columns, which skirted the western side of the palace, and down by the noble marble steps into the garden that sloped toward the river.

Merris pressed her hand to her heart. Did every woman love as she loved? This tender burden of longing? This sweet torture of waiting? Then the glad overcoming joy of the meeting!

She passed through the Walk of the Statues, on past the borders of sesame, then into the almond grove, under the acacias—the fountain!

He was standing with arms crossed, gazing at the one golden point in the southern sky. He had not heard her. She moved softly toward him. Suddenly feeling her presence, he turned with a cry and knelt before her, pressing the white scarf to his lips.

“ My princess!—Merris! ”

She gave a tender laugh.

“ Hora! That thou should'st kneel to me! ” she said chidingly. “ Foolish one! I could not love thee better if the blood of all the Pharaohs flowed in thy veins. If I loved thee more I should die! Thou should'st feel my heart now! It flutters like a frightened bird! Quiet it, Hora! Come! ”

She stretched out her arms and the man rose quickly and folded her to his breast.

When at last they unclasped from the warm embrace, he spoke.

“ I have news I must tell thee quickly, little lotus-flower! ”

Her face paled. “ Is it another battle? ”

“ Aye, but for me—the last! After—is it not wonderful?—I am to join the School of the Artists! Rameses himself hath spoken it. No more driving the chariot into battle! No more slaughter and carnage that my soul loathes! But Beauty, and the chance to create it! Love, and the opportunity

to express it! O, Light of my life, it is my love for thee I shall carve into the stone; that I shall paint with the colours of the sunrise! But how I speak, and thy dear eyes like lost stars looking questioningly up at me! Sit down and I will tell thee how it befell."

He drew her to a stone bench where she leaned within the curve of his arm.

"Thou knowest how often I have refused to have thee ask thy mighty Father to dismiss me from the charioteers to follow my great desire?" he questioned. "The king, I thought, would scorn to give his daughter to a man who forsook the dangers of spear and javelin for the safety of a chisel and brush! And, Merris"—a tremor shook his strong body—"I have but one fear in life—the fear of losing thee!"

"Thou canst never lose me, Hora! Out of all the great universe our spirits are one!" she answered softly.

"But only yesterday," he went on, "as I sat carving the head of one of the Hebrew slaves as he bent to his task, I saw the Mighty One himself approach. He bade me go on with my work until I had finished.

"Thou shalt do my bidding henceforth among my chief artists," he then said. "Drive to battle but once more and then another captain shall take thy chariot!" In my joy I almost told him our secret!"



“ Hora! ”

“ Flutter not, little bird. It is still safe in our hearts. But soon, when I shall have reared a column nobler than all the rest, carved and inlaid and painted as I see them in my dreams, then I shall go and beg of him the utterly priceless gift—”

“ And I, too, in my court robe and all my jewels, I shall go and kneel before him and pray him to grant me my love—”

“ And if he refuses? ” Hora’s dark face was tense.

Merris smiled tenderly. “ I shall fly with thee to the desert or the wilderness. Would’st thou give up thine art for me? ”

Hora drew her closer to him by way of answer. Then his eyes searched the heavens.

“ What a frail thing the art of man is, compared to the eternal beauty of the Universe! ” he said. “ Our temples, our tombs, our columns—if they should still be standing thousands of years from now—will convey to those who look upon them no living message, such as those stars keep bringing! Mere lumps of clay and rock, in spite of all our magnificent dreaming! Sometimes,” he lowered his voice, “ thou wilt not be frightened, little lotus-flower,—sometimes I wonder if Osiris and Amon and Ra and Thut and the others, are not creations of our own brain and that back of them, above them all is the One Great Spirit, the Great Artificer, in whom and from whom are all things? ”

"Thou hast been talking again with the Hebrews," Merris chided gently.

Hora bent to kiss her forehead.

"They interest me, these Hebrews," he replied. "Underneath all their frightful burdens, I can feel a strange power stirring within them. Their bodies are slaves, but not their spirits. It is as though a clear light shone upon them; as if their eyes had looked farther than ours, and had seen the truth. They will not always be slaves. They are but waiting for a leader, and when he comes! Oh, the opportunity before him! To mould a nation as clay in his fingers; to carve achievement, morality, destiny, upon the living hearts of men! That is true art! "

He sprang to his feet and stretched his hands above him.

"I would rather be *that leader* when he comes," he cried, "guiding his people from bondage to liberty, led by the clear light from that One Great Spirit in whom they believe, than to design by my own brain a Hall greater than Karnak, or a temple fairer than Abydos! "

He sank down upon the bench again and Merris laid her cool cheek against his burning one.

"How wildly thou speakest, tonight, my life! " she said softly. "How could there come a leader for the Hebrews? When could a man-child bent under his burdens find the learning he would need to oppose the forces of Pharaoh when he grew to

maturity? But I have something lying upon my heart more heavily, tonight, than the sorrows of the Hebrews. The battle! Hora, when thou art away at war I cannot eat; I cannot sleep! I feel the darts flying about thee. I can hear the roar of thy chariot wheels! Oh, I am so weak because I love thee. I fear for thee because thou art my life! ”

Hora laughed the strong laugh of youth unafraid.

“Little foolish one! ” he smiled indulgently. “ ’Tis but a day’s fighting—a day to go, a day to fight, a day to return to thee! And then, never again needst thou feel the darts in thy tender bosom! Thou hast been brave through long campaigns. Canst thou not be brave for one little day—the last day? See, I count them on thy fingers: one, two, three sunsets—only three—and I shall be with thee again, here by the fountain. And we shall plan the column—the great column that I shall build of twisted lotus-stalks perhaps, rising to a perfect flower like thy face! And we shall plan, too, how soon we may go to thy great father and present our desire. Merris! Merris! My heart sings at the thought. There, thou art happy now! And see! The little rosy star thou lovest so, has come out and smiles upon the river and on us! ”

“And by that sign I know that I must go,” Merris replied softly. Her hands, like two crushed lilies, lay within his strong ones.

At the end of the last embrace, Merris turned toward the acacia tree.

"I leave thee, Hora, but my heart remains," she said. "It is forever in thy keeping!"

"And mine," Hora's voice was vibrant, "rests within thy breast."

Night, darkly brooding, mysterious, lay upon Zoan-Tanis by the river. Merris, upon her couch, dreamed a maiden's happy dreams as she lived again in the touch of Hora's arms and felt his kiss upon her cheek.

Hora, pausing before his own doorway, stopped to look once more into the deeps of the sky. He felt the blood course hotly through his veins; he felt the lips of Merris upon his own. Was there ever before a woman so beautiful and so beloved? And the years, the long years to come! Love and Art! The fulfillment of desire! The purpose and end of his existence!

And yet, was there not something sinister in the blackness of the sky? Was there not a cold secret in the gleam of the stars? He looked searchingly into the infinity above him and then cried out in a sudden spiritual agony to the Great Spirit, that He would reveal to him the meaning of life.

While the same darkness wrapped the city, Pharaoh and his princes were following with gross eyes the movements of the dancers who threaded in and out among the tables of the banquet-hall; the Hebrews in their hovels were sleeping the sleep of

exhausted labour; and only a day's journey to the south, a man sat by a fire, chanting to an unnamed god a prayer for defense against approaching enemies, as he painstakingly dipped the tips of his rough arrow-heads in the poison of the adder.

The next three days, Merris watched the course of the sun as it rose in the bright flush of morning, moved slowly—oh, how slowly—to the golden noon, and then, more slowly still, sank into the river at night behind the tall masts and the white sails. On the third day the bird-like fluttering of her heart, the quick breathing that almost suffocated her, began at sunset when she heard the far shouts of victory and the heavy rumble of the returning chariot-wheels! The gladness that welled up within her, seemed more intense, more sweet than any she had ever known. Tonight, *tonight* she would look again on Hora's face!

Once again she dismissed the maidens early; once again she studied herself in the mirror. Tonight of all nights he must find her fair. She watched the shadows gather above the little lake Thufi, then once again slipped like a white shadow through the Hall of the Columns, down the marble steps and on through the gardens. The Avenue of the Statues, the border of sesame, the almond grove, the acacia tree, the fountain. She moved softly around the stone figures. She would surprise him as she had done before. . . .

"*Hora!*" the cry was wrung from her in sudden terror.

For the wide space before the fountain was empty, as was the marble seat, and the pathway! Nothing but the soft spray of the water, and the one golden point in the southern sky, broke the vast, deathlike quality of the night.

Merris sank upon the bench. She was ever foolish! He had met with delays. In a moment she would see his strong figure come striding through the trees.

She pressed her hands to her breast, fighting against a physical sickness of fear that threatened to overwhelm her, and waited, watching the pathway.

The darkness came on. Under the warm air Merris shivered.

When, at last, the little rosy star she loved, had come out to shine upon the river, there had fastened upon her a cold horror of certainty, a numb despair.

She rose as one moving in a dream, walked back through the almond grove and the Avenue of the Statues, moved like a dim wraith down the great Southern corridor, on and on, heedless of the unprecedented nature of the errand, through the great ante-rooms of the palace, past the guards, and at last into the banquet-hall.

The men gave way before her, for her face was such as the fairest of the daughters of Rameses



should wear—haughty, fixed, inscrutable. She bowed before Pharaoh her father and asked a single question.

The great man's stern face showed astonishment under its mask, but he answered quickly, briefly. Hora, the charioteer, had been slain by a poisoned arrow in the first hour of the battle, and his body, even now, was being prepared for a soldier's burial.

Merris moved again between the aisles of nobles, giving no sign upon her proud, set face.

She retraced her way through endless passages. As a traveller strains unseeing up the last steep slope of his journey, so Merris strove to conquer the last few feet that lay between her and her own chamber. And once within it, she sank under the merciful blackness that settled upon her, with a great shuddering cry to the gods that she might never see the light of another day.

But the gods heeded not. The gracious oblivion lifted. She lay awake with wide, hopeless eyes, watching the dawn rise over Thufi, watching her maidens as they waited anxiously upon her, consulted, ran upon quick errands.

When the physician came at last, she lay as an idly curious spectator, without speech, almost without thought, except a heavy awareness that, always hiding around the corner of her consciousness, a cruel sorrow waited to stab her.

And so the days followed in their same sure procession, imposing upon her the burden of life.



When she was able once more to go about her accustomed ways, she marvelled deeply. Something vital as breath itself had gone from her. She walked slowly as the old women walked in the streets; her eyes were dull, and not all the tireless efforts of the maidens could bring back the fresh, bright look of youth to her face. The arrow that had stricken Hora had been buried deeply in her own heart.

As the months passed Merris strove to find in each day something upon which to fasten her mind; some interest that would rise up strongly and win the victory over memory.

She journeyed to new cities and walked in strange streets; she sat with other princesses and wrought delicate embroidery and listened to the gossip of the palace. She called for her old tutor, Tah, and studied feverishly from all the papyri he brought her; she copied the poem of Pentaur, and committed long passages from *The Book of the Dead*.

She went to banquets and dinners, watched the jugglers and musicians and forced herself to gaiety; she attended the water games and contests; she played at mora and draughts with her maidens. And often she brooded upon the sorrows of the red-eyed Hebrew slave women in the hope that they might drown her own.

But it was all of no avail. The hurt in her heart would not heal. The only thing she desired of life

was the power to relinquish it. And as the year moved toward its one saddest day, Merris felt growing within her a strange and awful thought—a thought under which she shivered in the darkness of the night; but one which she grasped with the daylight as a prisoner greets his release.

And with it came the surprise that during all the painful months she had not thought of it before.

So coolly, so quietly, just beyond the sedges, the river would take her to its bosom—at the very spot above which the star she loved shone down, in sight of the fountain! One look upon the place where Hora's arms had last enfolded her and then, the sweet, encompassing darkness of death!

Merris felt her brain growing suddenly vigilant. There must be careful planning. For days before, the maidens must be trained to wait a little longer each time upon the shore while she went in to bathe behind the tall flag and papyrus lilies.

And then there must be made ready the garments which she would wear. Fine, web-like linen, embroidered in palest cream, such as would adorn a bride! And over that, the rich Tyrian dyed robe—she would seek for it, herself, among the merchants. She would wear, too, the jewels he had best loved!

The days that followed were actively unreal. Merris, in the intensity of her purpose, knew no weariness as she worked upon the delicate linens, making fine drawn-work, superintending her maid-

ens as they plied skilful needles over the intricate embroideries. Exquisite virginal garments!

She wandered, veiled, among the shops of the Tyrian merchants and, after days of searching, found one priceless robe that seemed to hold the colours of the sunset. With it she would wear her ornaments of turquoise and gold.

The last night came. No smallest detail for the morrow was lacking. But to Merris the darkness brought no fear. A sweet elation filled her.

There would be no more empty days of longing; in a few hours she would share with Hora the mystery of the great silence. Guided by Osiris, she might even find his soul awaiting hers! Life held no promise compared with that.

As the maidens braided her hair and massaged and perfumed her smooth cheeks the next morning, Merris bade her farewell to the rooms in which her girlhood had been spent. Her eyes noted each detail lovingly and then returned to brood upon the faces of her maidens.

When they were dismissed she put on, with her own trembling fingers, the sheer white garment, and the Tyrian robe. She clasped the turquoise circlets about her neck, her wrists.

A radiant vision reflected itself from the mirror as she raised it. The light had come again to her eyes, the winsome smile to her lips. Was it not her wedding morning? If not the bride of Hora, then the bride of Death.

She threw on quickly the long bathing-robe which concealed all beneath it. Only her flowing black hair, bound with its golden fillet, her glowing face, and her small, sandalled feet, met the gaze of the maidens as in respectful procession they followed her through the corridor, and down the marble steps. But soon they exchanged looks of surprise. For Merris was leading them through the Avenue of the Statues, past the sesame border, a way she had never been known to walk for a year—on, through the almond grove, and at last, very slowly, past the fountain. Then down the terraced sward to the edge of the river. Here and there, short flights of marble steps leading to the water broke the thick curtain of tall sedges. At one of these Merris paused.

“Wait here !” She gave the command gently, and then walked slowly down the steps and was hidden behind the flags.

Once concealed, she tossed her cloak upon the lower rushes and with arms thrown wide, began to move out through the shallow water. The exaltation of the night before rose strongly within her. She smiled as she felt the water rising upon her as she moved down the sloping beach. She looked up at the bright sky. How easy it was to leave it, even though she had once loved it well!

Her lips moved in a last prayer to Ra, the great sun-god. The water was rising swiftly,—her waist, her shoulders, her neck—one moment more—

"Osiris, receive me! Osiris, receive me! Hora! I am coming!" The water was almost to her lips.

Suddenly, upon the quiet of the morning, there came a sound—a faint, smothered, pitiful little cry. It broke through the blind ecstasy that enfolded Merris. An instinct, deeply rooted in the heart of her being, responded. It was not her will to stop, to retreat a few steps, to search the banks of the stream eagerly with her eye! It was the instant reaction to something which nature had compounded with the very elements of her body.

Merris listened, scanning the sedges. Then she caught her breath. Her eyes had lighted on a strange object that moved and yet remained caught among the flags. It seemed to be a basket, such as she had often seen the Hebrew women carry. A covered basket, prepared, evidently, with pitch. From beneath the lid a scrap of white cloth protruded. A quivering as of life within shook the sides. Then it came again. A small, pleading cry.

Merris stood hesitant, bewildered. Turn back from her great purpose? That would mean disappointment, weakness, disloyalty. And yet—The faint cry had entered her heart, and also a great desire to look closer upon the strange little craft from whence it issued. Merris gazed again at the glad, bright sky, at the green swaying sedge, at the sweet papyrus blooms. They seemed to put forth living fingers to urge her backward. She turned

about slowly. The supreme tryst must wait until tomorrow.

She moved quickly back through the water, snatched her robe and wrapped it about her, then called her maidens and pointed to the basket.

One of them waded out with strong steps along the sedges, and guiding it gently with one hand, steered the small barge back to her mistress, who, with the other maidens, waited at the marble steps.

Merris bent over it, with her own hands unfastened the lid of loosely-woven reeds, and then flushed with a sudden delight.

For there, on a clean square of coarse linen, wrapped in a blanket, lay a baby—a perfect baby! Its dark hair lay in soft, moist ringlets around its chubby, healthy face! Its little fat, dimpled hands moved in aimless, appealing gestures; from the careful folds of the blanket one tiny-toed foot had struggled free.

The maidens laughed with joy; they grew voluble in theories.

“ ’Tis a Hebrew baby, Highness! ” they exclaimed. “ See the features! ”

“ Ah, the sweet little mouth like a small lotus-flower! ”

“ Highness, some Hebrew woman has done this! Hast thou not heard how the overlords have been slaying the men-children, to keep down the numbers of the slaves? ”

Merris felt her heart sicken. She saw again the



red-eyed women at their burdens. She understood their sorrow now!

"And how clever to put him in the basket. Ah, he is hungry!"

The baby had watched the peering strangers with large, frightened eyes. Now his face wrinkled and he cried in distress.

Merris raised him gently and pressed him against her shoulder. At her touch he quieted, nestling his head in the curve of her neck.

Merris felt a strange thrill of joy.

With difficulty she brought herself back to the clamouring maidens.

"There is a girl here," one of them called out above the others, "who would speak to thee, Highness. She is asking if thou wilt keep the baby?"

"I *shall* keep him," said Merris softly. "Where is the girl?"

A child of twelve threw herself low before the feet of the princess.

"If thou bidst me, I shall go and call to thee a nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for thee."

"It is well," said Merris, "and one of my maidens shall go with thee, to guide her again to my chambers."

So, carrying her burden, Merris passed up the terraced walks, her heart stirring within her.

At the fountain, one of the maidens spoke.

"Highness, what shall be his name?" she asked.



Merris paused at the sacred spot. Old memories surged over her. Looks; words; the high, brave gallantry of Hora's spirit; his eager gladness of life!

Then she looked upon the river, where only a few minutes before she had almost gone blindly to the Realm of Shadows.

"His name shall be *Moses!* (saved)," she said.

The maidens nodded wisely. "That is because she drew him out of the water," they whispered.

That night the darkness fell soft and perfumed over Zoan-Tanis, city of Rameses, by the river.

In the chambers of Merris all was quiet. The waiting maidens lay in their appointed places behind the thick, tapestried curtain. The Hebrew woman had come for the second time, had nursed the little Moses, and had gone. Tomorrow she was to take her tiny charge back to her own house and keep him until he was weaned. But, tonight, he slept beside the bed of his new mother.

Merris tiptoed past the small couch where he lay, and on out to the Porch of the Columns.

Her heart was too full, her mind too active to allow her to sleep, as yet.

She searched the great sweep of the heavens with her eyes. The stars seemed to be on fire with meaning. The silent night spoke to her. And out of it came the voice of Hora, strangely near; and the dim, growing presence of the One Great Spirit,

the God of the Hebrews, who had that day blessed her with life.

For life, rich and sweet, again lay before her. What fathomless possibilities were in her relationship with the young soul that had been sent to her for her own! All the delights of motherhood opened up to her as she mused. The loving ministrations to his helplessness; then as he grew older, the songs she would sing to him; the stories she would tell him; the little pet gazelle she would have for him; the walks, the boat-rides on the river; the lessons in all the learning of Egypt that she and old Tah would give to him . . . and he must have a little harp, and the tiniest sling when he was old enough. . . .

Then she raised her face again to the stars. But this must not be all—only the least of what she must do for him.

She must teach him as Hora would have taught him. He must learn to be strong and yet meek. He must love beauty and hate coarseness, as Hora had done. He must be noble enough to turn his back upon the revellings of the court of Pharaoh and walk the ways of simplicity and purity, as Hora had been noble enough to do.

She must train him to. . . . A sudden thought flamed in her brain. *Might it be* that this child was to be the Deliverer of whom Hora had spoken? The leader of his people! Hora's words flashed again into her heart: "*I would rather be that*

*leader when he comes, guiding his people from bondage to liberty . . . than to design a hall greater than Karnak, a temple fairer than Abydus! ”*

Why should it not be so? In the counsels of the Great Spirit there must be room for this overpowering fulfilment for Hora's life and hers—and that of the sleeping child.

She bowed her head before the majesty of the thought. And as she did so, its meaning for her became more plain. She saw as through a far shadow down the vista of the years, a great renunciation. She must herself be brave enough to see him go forth with his own people, if that time should come, just as she had seen Hora go forth to battle! The long, sweet loving, and then the giving up! That was the lot of women.

But tonight. . . . She turned swiftly and re-entered her chamber. She fell upon her knees beside the couch and cradled the body of the baby Moses—the little, tender body, in her arms.

*III*

*THE VOW OF HANNAH*

*“Now there was a certain man . . . of mount Ephraim, and his name was Elkanah . . . and he had two wives; the name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah: and Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children.”*

—I SAMUEL 1:1-2.

### III

#### THE VOW OF HANNAH



HANNAH sat at the door of her house watching the shadows of evening lengthen on Mount Ephraim. There would be first the thin violet dusk in the valley of Ramah below, where straggling rays of daylight seemed to be caught here and there amongst the juniper trees. Then slowly the bright spots would be drowned in the flood of drenching darkness.

There would still be a flash of rose in the western sky above the mountain. Then softly it would go, too, and leave only blackness and pale stars.

In the room behind her there was silence—the cruel silence that stabs the heart. Just across the court in the dwelling of Peninnah there was noise and laughter. The shrill call of boys at their play, the chatter of girls as they helped their mother arrange the house for the night and finish excitedly the preparation for the morrow's trip to Shiloh. And in between the noise and the laughter came a thin little wail that caught Hannah's heart and twisted it with an exquisite anguish.

After a while Peninnah's room would grow quiet, too. But the silence there would be different. It would have in it that strange living, breathing quality that made it full of sweet sound to a woman's ears. And through the night there would be faint cries and tiny, muffled stirrings as of sleepy birds in a nest.

In Hannah's room the night was always still—and dead.

She leaned her head wearily against the doorway and waited. The village of Ramah was black now, and the stars, one by one, were dripping silver into the valley. At last the sounds across the courtyard stopped. There was only the dim light showing from Peninnah's door as from her own. It was night on Mount Ephraim.

Hannah sat listening. There was something majestic about the mountain-darkness. It was as though Jehovah Himself moved softly below the stars at this hour, listening to the heartbeats of His people. Could He hear hers? Did He know the intolerable craving that shook and wasted her—that made her days seem empty and her nights a pitiful burden? Had He seen her humiliation and shame? Had He heard her prayers? *Would He ever answer them?*

Suddenly Hannah raised her dark head in the stillness. Footsteps were crossing the court, strong quick footsteps. They passed the lighted doorway of Peninnah. They came toward hers, as she had



known they would. A thrill of sweet power shot through her heart like a dart and was gone again. Elkanah's great strength was towering above her. Then he sank to a seat beside her, looking into her eyes.

"Hast thou no word of welcome?" he asked in a low voice. "I have not seen thee since my return."

For answer Hannah smiled and leaned toward him. The sudden curving of her lips transformed her. It was like dawn upon the mountain-top. It changed the lofty seriousness of her countenance into the winsomeness of a child. It was a sunshine of the mind made visible.

Elkanah looked intently for a long second upon her beauty and then drew her to him.

"Didst thou miss me?" he asked softly.

Hannah nodded. Then she raised her head with a swift fierceness.

"It is unbearable here for me without thee, Elkanah," she burst forth. "I thought the time would never end."

The man smoothed her hair as he spoke hesitatingly.

"Was she—did she plague thee?" he asked.

Hannah shook her head. "No more than usual. But, of course, she hates me. It is the children, though, that torture me, all unknowing. They are so strong and clean-limbed and beautiful. They come dancing past my door and I hear them shout-

ing at their play. And when she sits in her doorway with the baby at her breast, I often think I shall die of pain! I believe I would *rather* die, Elkanah."

"Hush! Thou must not say such things nor yet think them. Death, like life, is in the gift of Jehovah. Thou wilt forget thy sorrow in tomorrow's feasting. The sights of Shiloh will put it all from thee. And, hearken. I have brought home with me the fairest lambs on all Ephraim for our sacrifice. They are portioned out now. And thy portion is by far *the greatest of all!* Does that not prove my love?"

Hannah dropped her eyes. "Thou art kind, Elkanah, but that may but make her more bitter," she said sorrowfully. "She is thy wife, even as I."

The man's voice was        and controlled, but there was passion behind it.

"Not as thou art," he answered earnestly. "I will not let thee say that. Peninnah is my wife, chosen for me by my mother. Her children are my own sons and daughters. It is my duty to be to her a husband and to them a father. But thou art the woman of my heart. Is it not enough?"

Hannah looked up into his face. Her broad white brow was troubled, but her lips were tender.

"Thou knowest what thy love has been to me, Elkanah," she answered quietly. "It is all life holds for me. But how can I make thee understand the other hunger that is never satisfied! Or

how can I make thee feel my shame? I go with empty hands through the years. My life is wasted. Some day I shall lose my beauty and my strength and then there will be no children springing up around me to bring it back to me in their faces. I am afraid to grow old, Elkanah! Age is only for the mothers of strong sons and daughters. I shall be like a bare tree while all those around me are laden with fruit." Her voice broke in a sob.

The man suddenly raised her to her feet.

"Come," he said. "Thou hast been musing too long alone in the darkness. Come, while we talk of the morrow."

And he drew her swiftly within and closed the door behind them.

With the coming of the morning, Hannah awoke with a lighter heart. It was impossible to be entirely unhappy when the sunshine was flooding the room and the birds were singing gaily outside. Besides, she was still young and she thrilled at the look on Elkanah's face when she wore the soft, new dress he had bought her a few months before.

And she would wear it today! And her gold chain and ear-rings! She would make herself as lovely as possible, for the feast day at Shiloh!

Last year, all the joy of the occasion had been embittered for her by Peninnah: by her mocking smile, her open taunts, her whispered insults. To-day, she was going to be more brave. She resolved

to keep her mind fixed upon other things: upon the diversions of the journey; upon the glad, sunny weather; upon the sacrifice of the temple; upon Elkanah's love. She would try even to be friendly with Peninnah!

She called across to her as she went about her morning duties. Peninnah answered curtly. She had heard the strong footsteps cross the courtyard the night before. There was in her tone the deep, settled venom of jealousy.

Hannah went on quietly preparing herself for the journey. Because of the hostility in Peninnah's voice she brushed a little more lustre into her velvety black hair, and fastened in her small, pink ears the glittering drops Elkanah had once brought her from Jerusalem. She clasped the heavy gold chain about her neck, and the circlet of coins about her forehead. When, at last, she was ready, she knew that she was very fair.

She walked out into the courtyard and crossed to where Elkanah and the servants waited with the donkeys.

If Peninnah had not stepped from her own door at that very moment with her children, the course of the day might have been different. As it was, she was in time to see Hannah standing in the sunshine with Elkanah's eyes devouring her beauty. He did not speak, of course, nor even smile. He stood austere beside the servants, towering above them. He stood as a man of dignity and impor-

tance would stand, waiting for his wife and children to take their proper places in the small caravan. Only his eyes spoke through the haughty mask of his countenance. And they were on fire as he looked upon Hannah. They were the eyes of a man who loves.

Peninnah, also clad in her gay best, with her baby in her arms and her other four handsome children beside her, had counted upon this moment as a supreme triumph. She had carefully timed it so that Hannah should be waiting desolate, while she, with her sturdy, rosy brood, crossed with exultant pride, to Elkanah.

As it was, . . . Neither of them saw her until she was close upon them. Then Elkanah spoke to her in his tone of kindly tolerance which was to her more bitter than blows, and motioned them all to their places with Hannah riding immediately behind him.

It was fewer than twenty miles, but the road wound in and out among the hills. They travelled slowly, Elkanah first, then the women and children. The servants with the pack-donkeys, upon which were laden the food and tents, and the sacrifice for the next day, brought up the rear.

Hannah was in strangely high spirits. She sang to herself as they passed through the fresh, green country. All life should be joyous in that bright landscape. She looked forward eagerly to the strange happy events of the feast-day. Once in a

while, Elkanah looked behind. His keen glance missed no detail of those who followed him. But his look always clung for a brief moment to Hannah. And Peninnah always saw it.

It was ten o'clock of the next morning when they reached Shiloh. Already a great concourse of people were gathered. Tribe by tribe they were ranged in their hasty camps about the town. Sounds of excited meetings and of festival rejoicings were everywhere. In the centre of it all was the temple over which Eli the priest and his sons presided. Hannah looked at the top of its curtained roof with a tender awe in her heart. She loved its beauty, its mystery, its haven. Here was the tabernacle of the Lord! Here was the dwelling of Jehovah!

Back of the hangings of fine-twined linen, far behind the curtains of blue and purple and scarlet, in that last hidden room that no common eye might look upon, rested the Ark of the Lord, and the Mercy Seat above which the Cherubim brooded with golden wings.

Hannah's eyes grew wistful. The Mercy Seat, where the prayers of the faithful hovered like incense! Surely no petition uttered within the bounds of the sanctuary should pass unregarded. And yet. . . . She shook off the weight that began to settle upon her. No doubts of the faithfulness of Jehovah must rise here on this bright and holy day. She followed Elkanah to the spot



he and the servants had staked off for their small encampment.

There were many things to attend to, and, for a while, both women were busy helping in the business of unpacking the provisions, and arranging the details of the day's housekeeping. Then came the moment for which even the servants looked eagerly; the unloading from the donkeys of the sacrificial portions for each member of the household. There was a moment of respectful hush while Elkanah designated each. The portions were generous, larger than they had ever been before. Even Peninnah's calculating eye brightened as she saw what had been assigned to her and her children.

Then it suddenly darkened again as two of the men staggered under the last load. It was larger than any other two put together. It was Hannah's. So in the eyes of the whole household had she been established as the best-beloved.

On Peninnah's face there settled a look of cold fury, of implacable hate. And Hannah knew that from that hour the battle would be more fiercely waged. She wondered miserably what new weapons her adversary would be able to lay her hand to.

Elkanah and the men had carried the sacrifices to the temple. There was nothing more to do until the afternoon, when the great meal of the feast would be eaten. The women were all free to visit



each other. Peninnah marshalled her children around her and moved toward the next tent. She greeted the woman there with hearty ease. Her words came clearly to Hannah.

"The blessing of Jehovah upon you and your house! Dost thou not remember me? I am the wife of Elkanah the Kohathite, from Mount Ephraim. And these are my children. Ah, thou dost know me now! See how the oldest has grown? He is the exact image of his father. And look at my baby! How many hast thou?"

The woman came back with Peninnah, and she hailed other women and drew them into her tent—always women with babies at their breasts and children beside them. Peninnah's voice kept rising above the others.

"Ah, a fine lad! And these are mine. Just like their father, both of them. Thou knowest him, Elkanah of Mount Ephraim! Yea, *he is proud of them!*"

Then at a low question concerning the silent figure of Hannah in the background Peninnah whispered venomously, "The other wife. *Never a child!* Cursed by Jehovah for her vanity. Sits all day before a mirror. . . ."

A sharp cry from Hannah brought all eyes upon her.

"How darest thou say such a thing!" she cried. Her dark eyes blazed at Peninnah. "Thou liest, and to strangers!"

Peninnah leaned toward the breathless group of women.

"Pay no heed," she said aloud. "She hath a vile temper. I go no nearer to her than I must. It is not well to be too close to those whom God hath cursed! "

The other women approved. They drew farther from Hannah and resumed the discussion of their children.

Hannah put her hand to her brow. Had she heard aright? Was it *she*, Hannah, that by a word from her enemy had been made an outcast? All the brightness of the day was over. She felt powerless to retrieve it. She wandered forlornly among the tents, hoping to see old friends. She did find a few, but they were all eager to display their children. Their questions only turned the knife sharply in fresh wounds.

On her way back she overheard a whisper here, a low voice there, as women peered cautiously at her; "*Cursed*, they say, by Jehovah for her vanity! Never a child. *Cursed!* "

Hannah's brain was on fire. Other years there had been only the private taunts of Peninnah to bear; now she had become a character of public reproach. Her barrenness was not merely misfortune; it had come, through her rival's wicked words, to be a disgrace in the eyes of the tribe. Her heart was sore and desperate.

Everyone was suddenly beginning to prepare the

feast. Hannah did not look at Peninnah as she worked blindly by her side. Of what avail was it to burst forth in angry reproaches? The harm was done. Besides, she would but feel lowered to the level of her enemy if she quarreled openly with her. But the distress of her soul had to have an outlet. As they sat down to the feast with the glad family groups on all sides and the sounds of rejoicing everywhere, the stern self-control with which she had so steeled herself gave way. She clenched her hands and stiffened herself against the dissolution of all her proud fortresses of reserve. It was no use. Her pent-up grief could not be withstood. She drew back from the table and stood alone, shaken and sobbing in her anguish.

Elkanah had returned from his duties with the sacrifice only in time to assist, as a father, in the proper placing of his children at the feast-table. He looked up suddenly from the gloating eyes of Peninnah to see Hannah standing apart, her dark head bent upon her breast. With a swift stride he was beside her.

"Hannah," he said with tender concern, "why weepest thou? And why eatest thou not?"

For answer she raised her shadowy eyes to his face. The burden of her old pain looked through her tears.

Elkanah threw his arm convulsively about her. His voice thrilled with feeling.

"Why is thy heart so grieved?" he whispered.  
"*Am not I better to thee than ten sons?*"

For a long second he held her eyes to his while she crushed back her sobs. Then she smiled bravely.

"I will go back now, Elkanah," she said, and followed him to the table.

As she joined mechanically in the jubilation about her, her eyes sought the high-curtained dome of the temple. Somewhere above the hushed inner fastness of the Holy of holies Jehovah dwelt, listening to the prayers of His people. Her own would be offered Him once more. Surely He could not withstand the cry of her need *for ever!*

Her gaze wandered to the great portals of the temple itself. Old Eli sat there, bowed with age, his long white beard rising and falling feebly upon his breast. His dim, old eyes looked piteously toward a riotous group on the outer edge of the feast-tables. Hophni and Phineas lurched laughing from amongst it, their lustful eyes roving. Hannah winced. When the sons of the priest were vile, where was the hope of Israel? Who would administer justice and bring the word of Jehovah to the people when old Eli was gone!

Suddenly a thought burned through her brain as though it had been a live coal from the altar—a daring, holy, ecstatic thought. As through a mist she saw the faces of the people about her. Their voices came dully to her ears. She ate and drank

blindly, her whole soul absorbed in the idea which had been born to her.

At last the feast was over. Through the medley of voices and movements Hannah stole away. She walked swiftly toward the temple and in at the open doorway between the heavy, twined linen curtains. She moved toward the altar of the outer court and fell upon her knees. Her dark eyes seemed to pierce the scarlet and blue hangings, searching for The Great Presence above the Mercy Seat. She raised her hands before her, the nails piercing the flesh. The tears of her sore weeping ran unheeded down her cheeks. The words broke bleeding from her heart though her moving lips made no sound.

“O Lord of hosts,” prayed Hannah, “if Thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thine handmaid and remember me, and not forget thine handmaid! If thou wilt give unto me a man child, *then I will give him unto the Lord all the days of his life!* O Lord of hosts, if Thou wilt remember me. . . . *I will give him unto Thee. . . . I will give him. . . .*”

Suddenly a voice spoke behind her.

“How long wilt thou be drunken?” it said sternly. “Put away thy wine from thee!”

Hannah rose bewildered. In the shadows of the curtain stood Eli, his dim eyes peering, his thin hands trembling upon his staff. Hannah understood. He had mistaken her frenzied posture, her

moving lips, her very presence in that unaccustomed place.

"Nay, my lord," she answered with slow dignity, "I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink. But I am a woman of a sorrowing spirit and I have poured out my soul before the Lord. Out of the abundance of my grief have I been praying."

They faced each other, in the stillness of the holy place: the young woman who had no son and the old man whose sons were vile; the pain in the eyes of the one challenged the pain in the eyes of the other; but the woman's conquered.

"Go in peace," Eli said slowly, "and the God of Israel grant thee the petition that thou hast asked of Him! "

Hannah bowed low before him. "Let thine handmaid find grace in thy sight," she answered, and slipped between the curtains out into the bright confusion of Shiloh.

A miracle had touched her. Her heavy heart was gone. She felt light, eager, transported. No more an outcast by Peninnah's taunts, but Hannah the beautiful, the beloved, whose prayer would be answered!

For a consuming confidence possessed her. She had added to her petition a vow which Jehovah could not disregard. Upon it all had been pronounced the blessing of the man of God.

She moved with her head high through the noisy



groups about her. She moved with a smile upon her lips, and a rapturous hope in her heart.

In the first breaking light of a midsummer morning, Elkanah, shivering strangely, walked back and forth before the byre and looked across to the light which had burned all night in the room of the woman he loved. He had kept his own watch under the stars, striding along the path to the sheep-fold, leaning on the fence of the pasture-field, then taking up his restless walk again, waiting, listening, praying. Wondering what he would do if the light went out of that room forever.

Quick, anxious voices had come to him from time to time. They belonged to the wives of Ramah who went about their secret ministrations in that room. Just as the dim flush of dawn suddenly became day, a woman running fleetly across the courtyard brought him the news. After a night of agony Hannah had borne a son.

When he stood at last beside her bed and looked at her spent face with the ecstasy of motherhood upon it he heard her whisper, "His name must be Samuel, because I asked him of the Lord."

As the first weeks and months passed, the neighbours of Ramah called each other to witness that they had never seen such a perfect child as the little Samuel. His rosy hands were so cunning, his baby-dimpled legs so strong, his eyes so bright and



knowing. Even Peninnah could see, bitterly, that he was more beautiful than any of her own children. She was strangely subdued by the unexpected eminence to which Hannah had been raised. But the old hate still shone in her eyes and slumbered in her heart.

To Hannah herself, a new world had been freshly created. It was as though from a pale dream of living she had awakened to bright, tingling reality. She laughed, she sang. She feasted her starved heart upon her baby's beauty. Her days became breathless with happy activity; and her nights were alive with loving care. She, too, now sat at her door in the sunshine and rocked her child to sleep. It was sweet to know that at last Peninnah had no weapon with which to torture her.

And so the year told off its tale of joyous days until once more it was the time for the feast at Shiloh. Hannah had been disinterested in all the preparations and Elkanah had watched her anxiously. In all their rejoicing over the coming of the child, there had been one subject unnamed between them. That was the vow. He had waited for Hannah to speak. And she had been silent. Now, on the eve of the day when he and all his house would go up to the gathering of the tribes, he walked slowly to Hannah's door and stood hesitant, the burden of his duty upon him.

Hannah was putting her baby to sleep, and only looked up to smile.

"Thou wilt not go up to Shiloh on the morrow—with the child?" he asked slowly.

Hannah shook her head, and rocked the baby against her breast.

Elkanah waited.

"Thou hast not forgotten *the vow?*" he asked painfully.

Hannah rose and faced him.

"*The vow!*" she echoed through white lips.

Elkanah did not answer. He only looked steadily into her eyes. In his own, Hannah read all the stern loyalty of the tribe of Levi, all the unalterable devotion of a Son of Kohath. She thought of Jephtha and shivered. To her alone had Elkanah revealed his tenderness. All men knew his strength.

Still they faced each other. Then Hannah spoke, her lips stiff, her breath coming quickly. "I will not go up until the child be weaned, and then I will bring him, that he may appear before the Lord—and—there—abide—forever," she said. The last words were a whisper.

Elkanah's eyes were yearning now, but his countenance did not relax.

"Do what seemeth thee good," he replied gravely. "Tarry, if thou wilt, until thou hast weaned him. Only," and he forced her eyes again to meet his, "*only, the Lord establish his word!*"

When he had gone, Hannah sat down dazedly, clutching Samuel to her. It had come, then. The vague dark cloud of fear that had hovered far in

the background of her joy had drawn close, had taken form, had fastened itself irrevocably upon her. She was forever committed now to Elkanah and to Jehovah. The vow that her lips had given that long day ago in the temple was cut now upon her heart.

*Until he was weaned!*

But even at the thought the deep, joyous satisfaction of the present overwhelmed her. The terror of the future melted. It was one, two, oh, perhaps three years away. And tonight a new moon hung over Ephraim, a soft breath of field lilies came on the midsummer air, and close to her heart lay the perfect baby, her first-born. She had waited so long for the triumph of her hope; she would feast upon it now, let the years bring what they would.

And then, far below both the joy and the fear of her heart, there was suddenly a faint stirring as of a whisper of a voice to come; the first thin up-leaping of that fierce white fire of maternal pride and ambition that is selfless!

As little Samuel grew in beauty and in stature, passing with what seemed incredible rapidity from babyhood to childhood; as his toddling steps became a sturdy walk and his rosy lips learned to form the words plainly, Elkanah watched Hannah and marvelled. Not once since that first night when her stiff white lips had repeated to him her vow, had her high courage seemed to waver. She spoke constantly of the time, now so near, when

she would take the child up to Shiloh and dedicate him forever to the service of the temple. Her eyes even shone as she spoke of it.

She told Peninnah proudly of her plans. Peninnah's lip curled. She looked at Hannah with a curious wonder tinged with disdain. That Samuel was destined by his mother to become a leader in Israel moved her to no envy.

"I shall keep my children with me," she announced complacently. Once more she felt a weapon fitted to her hand.

But Peninnah and even Elkanah himself did not know the substance of the dreams upon which Hannah was now feeding day by day.

When dawn broke red in the east, she saw the courts of the temple and the form of the priest of God moving through them like a lustrous vision. Her poet-soul mirrored his image. She saw his ephod of blue with its hem of golden bells and pomegranates. She saw high upon his head the mitre of fine linen with its glistening inscription and lace of blue.

And by his side, passing between the tall pillars with their fillets of silver, through the heavy hangings of purple and scarlet, up to the golden altar of incense itself, she saw *a boy*, with her own deep dark eyes and Elkanah's strong mouth; a boy with a raised, rapt face breathing in the perfume of the morning oblations,—*her son!*

And when night fell over Mount Ephraim and

the little village of Ramah lay asleep, Hannah dreamed of the hushed silence of the temple. After the evening sacrifice and the offering of incense, when the last echoes of the chanted hymn had died in the dim courts; and ere the lamp of God had gone out in the golden branching candlesticks of the Holy Place, there would be in that sacred quietness only three living souls: the spirit of Jehovah Himself brooding above the Mercy Seat, old Eli, the priest of Israel, and a boy,—*her son!*

Surely in that mystic company his soul would be caught up into heavenly visions. Surely it would be fed with the very fires of God. So dreamed Hannah in the night-time.

But through the days she thrilled and trembled at the thought of a greater pride. She saw Samuel grown, his baby beauty graven in strength. She saw *him* instead of old Eli in the wondrous ephod, traversing the courts of the temple, burning the sweet incense of oblation, offering with holy hands the evening sacrifice. She saw him, a man of God, judging the people righteously, swaying Israel by the word of *his* counsel, priest, prophet, seer,—*her son!*

When the last day came, the leave-taking was very quiet. Peninnah watched from her doorway with her look of curious, complacent disdain. Little Samuel ran about, joyously excited over the journey.

Elkanah, his face set, his eyes suffering, saw to

the lading of the pack donkey with the three bullocks, the flour, and the wine, and then watched the boy and waited for Hannah.

She came, carrying the child's neat bundle of clothing, her face very calm, very white, her eyes shining with a fierce, unreal exaltation.

On the way she pointed out the bright flowers, the birds, the strange villages, and answered the child's endless questions. She and Elkanah did not speak.

But as they neared Shiloh she caught the boy closer to her. The light on her face grew brighter. She spoke of nothing but the glory of the temple to which they were going. Little Samuel peered eagerly with round, childish eyes.

When they stood at last in the presence of Eli, Hannah advanced and knelt before him.

"Oh, my lord," she began in her low vibrant voice, "as thy soul liveth, I am the woman that stood by thee here once, praying in the temple. For this child I prayed, and the Lord hath given me my petition which I asked of Him. Therefore also I have lent my child to the Lord! As long as he liveth he shall be lent to the Lord! "

The face of the old man worked visibly. He raised his trembling hands.

"Blessed be the child and they that have brought him to the house of the Lord! " he said. "Jehovah hath not left His dwelling desolate, but hath raised up youth and beauty within it."



He reached his hand toward Samuel, and the little boy went to him, leaning confidently against the holy robes of the priest, fingering the curious twisted girdle with wondering touch.

As Hannah saw it, a thrill of exultation shook her. She raised her head and clasped her hands on her breast. Her eyes burned in her white face. The words, born in her poet's-soul, poured swiftly from her lips:

*"My heart rejoiceth in the Lord.  
My mouth is enlarged over mine enemies  
Because I rejoice in thy salvation!  
There is none holy as the Lord,  
For there is none beside thee:  
Neither is there any rock like our God! . . .*

*"The bows of the mighty men are broken;  
And they that stumbled are girded with  
strength! . . .*

*"He raiseth up the poor out of the dust  
To make them inherit the throne of glory!  
For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's  
And he hath set his world upon them.*

*"He will keep the feet of his saints,  
And the wicked shall be silent in darkness!"*

Elkanah had stepped back in amazement as Hannah began to speak; old Eli's lips moved with the echo of her words, his body rocking slowly



from side to side, his eyes raised to heaven; on the face of the child was a frightened wonder.

Then suddenly, all was as it had been before. Hannah rose from her knees and took her place modestly beside Elkanah, her countenance calm, her eyes quiet. Samuel ran to her, watching her face for its familiar smile. Then, led by Eli, they walked through the echoing courts of the sanctuary to see the place that from that day forth was to be the home of the child.

When they started, at last, on the journey back to Ramah, Hannah watched over her shoulder until the last dim outline of the temple's curtained roof was hid from view, then with white lips set, she fixed her eyes on the road before them.

Elkanah looked often behind him as the day advanced, but Hannah did not speak. Her head seemed to be sinking lower upon her breast.

"It is a pleasant enough little room he will have," the man said awkwardly at last. "There is the pallet and chair, and the table for the candle."

No answer.

"It is near the room of the priest. He would hear if the child. . . ."

Silence. They rode on.

It was sundown when they turned up the last slope of the mountain-road. As they passed the tamarisk tree below the house where Samuel had loved to play, Elkanah thought he heard a sound

behind him. But when he turned Hannah's lips were set as they had been when she left Shiloh.

They were home. They dismounted from the donkeys and Elkanah led them toward the barn. Hannah walked across the courtyard alone. And there, once again armed with power, sat her old adversary. Peninnah had planned the scene with cruel understanding. She sat before her own doorway in the sweet homing time of the day with her children playing about her, and at her breast the baby who was only a little younger than Samuel. Her eyes taunted Hannah as she approached. Her lips smiled disdainfully. There was no need of words; she only gathered her children closer to her.

Hannah walked on and into her own rooms. Once again there was about her only emptiness and silence. She moved slowly through it, touching the table where he had eaten his last meal, the little pallet, still unrolled, where he had slept, a plaything she had thought best to leave behind, the little tunic too worn to send with him! She touched them one by one, slowly, as if she were a stranger to them.

And then with the step of Elkanah at the door, something within her seemed to turn to fire. She faced him with the blood pounding in her head and her eyes blazing. Her hands worked wildly at her breast, her throat, then half stifled the scream on her lips.

*"Elkanah, what have I done? My baby!*

My little boy! Elkanah, thou must listen! Thou must do what I say. My baby! In the great empty, echoing place! Alone with an old priest and with God! Elkanah, I cannot stand it! He will waken. He will be afraid. *He will cry for me!* I cannot bear it. I must have him. Hearken! "

She was panting. The words were quick. Her tortured hands still wrung and twisted at her dress.

"We will go back, now, at once. We will ride quickly through the night, and be there by morning. I shall be beside him when he wakes in that strange dark place! We will bring him home! Do not look at me so, Elkanah. I tell thee I cannot endure it. I shall go mad! I shall die to think of him there so little, and alone! I cannot live without him. We will bring him home. Eli will understand. And as to the vow, *I care not if I am cursed!* I cannot give him up."

She was sobbing now, clinging to her husband, her arms about his neck.

"If thou *lovest* me, Elkanah, take me back! Take me back for him. And oh, let us hasten."

The man's eyes were wet and his face haggard, but he made no move to go. He unclasped her hands from about his neck and held them tightly in his own.

Her eyes searched his beseechingly.

"Hast thou forgotten that the child is given for-

ever to Jehovah?" he said gravely. "He is no longer ours."

Hannah's lips moved.

"Mine, *mine*, he is mine," she whispered.

Elkanah's strong, even voice overpowered her.

"And thy song in the temple and the sacrifice and the blessing of the priest," he said. "Hast thou forgotten so soon? Was the child not given us that we might lend him to the Lord? Thou art weary and undone from the journey." He led her to the doorway. "Rest here where it is cool. Thou wilt feel differently on the morrow."

"*Elkanah . . .*" her voice was piteous.

Above her the man's face was marked with pain, but his voice was steady.

"The Lord must establish His word," he said slowly.

Hannah sank down beside the lintel. She did not cry out now. There were only small terrible moans as of a pain too deep for sound. Beside her Elkanah stood helpless, waiting. The travail of that other night when he had kept his watch under the stars was as nothing to this. It was her soul now that was passing through the fire.

Sounds came from Peninnah's door, laughter and a childish cry. Hannah shuddered.

Surely, Jehovah must measure the greatness of her gift by her suffering now, instead of by her song in the temple! Perhaps some time after endless tomorrows had passed, she would again know

her holy dreams of aspiration for her boy,—her pride, her hope. But, tonight, there were no visions. Only a stark desolation.

Elkanah still waited. The sounds from Peninnah's rooms ceased. Behind them in Hannah's dwelling was once again the silence that stabs the heart.

Elkanah stood, desperate, helpless. The dusk became darkness. Out of it Hannah slowly raised her head. A voice came, half whisper, half sob:

"I shall make him . . . a little coat . . . woven with my own fingers . . . embroidered. . . . Day by day I shall work upon it and I shall pretend he is but gone to play beneath the tamarisk tree or out with thee at the byre . . . year after year I shall make him a little coat and take it up to the feast, so that he may not . . . forget me."

The village of Ramah was hidden in blackness now. One by one the stars came out, dripping silver into the valley below.

"A little coat. Year after year . . . a little coat . . ."

Elkanah sank down beside her, and drew her head against his breast.

It was night again upon Mount Ephraim.

*IV*

*THE GUERDON OF NAOMI*

*“And it came to pass, when they were come to Beth-lehem, that all the city was moved about them, and they said, Is this Naomi?”—RUTH 1:19.*



## IV

### THE GUERDON OF NAOMI

**I**T struck through the dull, narrow street like a sudden stab of sunshine. An old man walking slowly and heavily, two young girls coming dispiritedly from the well with their water-jars on their shoulders stopped where they met, listened, and then nodded knowingly to each other. The sound was almost as rare in Bethlehem those days as bread itself. It was a song, high, gay, and lilting, and it came from the house of Elimelech. "Naomi," murmured the girls. "The Winsome One," whispered the old man.

The song rose higher. There was a gallant note in it like that of a sailor flinging his chantey in the teeth of a storm. Then the door opened quickly and Naomi stood before them, hands at her waist, head high, black eyes flashing, red lips parted in laughter.

"Verily," she cried, "I know now why we have famine in Judah. 'Twas the long countenance of old Simon that made the corn wither away in the fields! 'Twas the salt tears of Chuza and Mary

that dried up the grapes on their stems! Ah, thou dost smile now! That is better. The merry heart will ever win the race over the sad one. Think of next year's harvest! How we shall all sing and shout at the threshing-floors and around the wine-presses! "

"Ah, next year!" Old Simon's thin face clouded again. His tone was bitter. "There may be plenty for those who are living to enjoy it, but what of us who starve now? "

Naomi's eyes grew soft. For a second she stood silent as though calculating, then with a quick, impetuous movement, she flashed from the doorway into the street. She caught the old man's hand.

"Come, Father Simon! I know what thou dost need to bring thee cheer. A little glass of wine! Thou dost know the wine of Elimelech? The best in all Bethlehem. And a barley cake with it? Come, Chuza and Mary! What dost thou say? We shall have a little feast, we four. What matter if we did all sup heavily this morning! "

She made a small grimace. Mary, the paler of the two girls, broke suddenly into nervous laughter at the daring irony.

"See?" Naomi went on delightedly. "Mary brings mirth to the feast. A good guest! Hurry, Father Simon and Chuza."

She drew them strongly with her to the doorway. They tried to hang back, but the eagerness of hunger was in their eyes.

Simon spoke gently. "Thou wert well named, Naomi. Thy heart is as winsome as thy face. But shouldst thou give thy children's bread to strangers?"

For answer Naomi drew her dark brows together pathetically. Her red lips pouted.

"'Tis but an excuse," she murmured reproachfully. "Thou dost scorn the hospitality of my house!"

Then as the others grew anxiously voluble, she laughed her full, deep-throated laugh, drawing them inside.

"I knew that would bring thee. See, sit here Father Simon and Mary and Chuza. I shall be but a moment."

She ran back and forth gaily, bringing the wine in small cups, and the barley cakes, *three of them!* So brightly did she talk and move that it was scarcely noticeable that she ate nothing herself.

Her keen eyes missed no trace, however, of the effect of the food upon her guests. Old Simon's white, sunken cheeks seemed almost to take on the colour of health; and something like brightness came into the heavy eyes of the young girls.

When the little meal was over, Naomi bade them good-bye in the doorway.

"Remember," she called, cutting short their vehement gratitude, "next harvest we shall see Mary and Chuza so rosy, so fat! With faces like this!" She inflated her own cheeks drolly. "And

Father Simon—Oh, he will be so rich, so proud, when his vines break down with grapes! He will walk *so!* ” She strutted absurdly back and forth across the door-sill.

So they went away, her three guests, laughing in spite of themselves, warmed with the wine, strengthened with the bread.

Naomi shut the door behind her and crossed the room soberly. She peered into a stone pot and recounted the barley cakes within it. Then she drew a sigh of relief. She had made no mistake. The rest of the day's rations for Elimelech, her husband, and for Mahlon and Chilion, her two boys, were intact. The three cakes she had given away were her own,—were to have made up her noon and evening meal. So that was all right. She was so strong. She could do without. She would keep busy all day and never once think of food.

Besides, it was quite certain that when Elimelech and the boys returned that night they would have the sacks of grain for which they had gone on their long journey.

Her voice rose again, clear and sweet.

Naomi was a favourite in Bethlehem. From the time when she had been the centre of all the children's games in the marketplace, through the period of her young maidenhood when every stalwart youth in the countryside had sued for a glance from her bright eyes or a word from her ready tongue, on through the years, when as the

wife of Elimelech, she had made the little house in the narrow street, a fair place and tenderly reared her two sturdy sons,—all her life she had been a belle and a leader in her village.

It was Naomi's wit that made every gathering sparkle with life; it was Naomi's voice that raised the songs at the weddings, and whose feet still lightly led the dance!

But, more than this. It was to Naomi's house that the old and poor and sorrowing turned for help, and from which they were never sent empty away. It was her strong, tender hands that smoothed many a sick pallet and gently closed the eyes of the dead. "The Winsome One," they called her, and there seemed to be magic in the name.

On this day as she went about her duties her dark eyes lacked their usual light in spite of the song on her lips. The cloud of famine that had been hanging over the countryside of Judah was beginning to grow darker. Never until this week had there been deaths from hunger in Bethlehem. It was at this frightful discovery that Naomi had carefully rationed the provisions in the house, and Elimelech, with a set face, had planned the journey upon which he and the boys were gone.

Naomi tried resolutely to put the terrifying thought behind her as she worked. She forced her mind to dwell upon happy things. She thought of the town. Dear Bethlehem! How she loved it!

Of the neighbours she had known all her life. How happy they all were together! Even in such hard times as these, they had the dear old friendships to cheer them. She thought of her sons, Mahlon and Chilion, just verging toward manhood. How sweet it would be when they married! When she would hold their children in her arms. And for their wives? Oh, surely the loveliest maidens in Bethlehem were none too fair for them. And even more than beauty, they must possess a family line untainted such as hers and Elimelech's had been!

Her mind went over the pleasant round of a mother's dreams.

At sunset she laughed aloud with quick delight. She had actually forgotten all about her supper! How easy! Now she could pretend she had already eaten.

It was almost dusk when her husband and the two boys entered the room. Naomi had been talking brightly to a neighbour at the back doorway. As she turned and saw them she gave a cry of pleasure; then stopped at the look on her husband's face.

"Elimelech!"

Her eyes swept the three as they stood there before her. Elimelech's face was haggard; the boys were weary and downcast. The sacks which were to have carried back life and safety for them all, hung empty in their hands.

Her husband spoke.



"It is of no avail," he said. "There is no food to be had in all Judah. In Jerusalem they are dying like flies. The whole countryside is desolate. I have decided what we shall do. We will arise and journey even unto Moab. There is food there. We shall dwell there till the famine is past."

"To *Moab!*" The words scarcely formed themselves on Naomi's lips. Her great dark eyes were amazed, incredulous.

"We shall go soon—on the day after the morrow." The words fell heavily from him.

Naomi's face was white. She caught her husband's arm.

"Ah, no," she begged despairingly. "Thou wilt not take me from my own people . . . to a strange land . . . to dwell among the heathen! Nay, Elimelech, dost thou not know that the curse of Jehovah will fall upon us there?"

"It is upon us now," her husband ground out through set teeth. "And I will not watch thee starve."

That was all. Except that through the long night Naomi lay awake, white-lipped, in the darkness. She was leaving Bethlehem. No more would she run to the spring in the early morning and talk with the other women. Nor at noon, nor at evening. No more could she raise her voice in the psalms of Israel and hear other voices taking up the strain.

She was going to a foreign land. She, of all



women, to whom companionship was as the air she breathed, was to be alone. Her little house dismantled; the precious things which her fingers had cared for lovingly these eighteen years, scattered!

And then, *Moab!* To dwell among the heathen! Her heart sickened at the thought. Oh, that she might stay and die among her own people!

But slowly as the night wore toward dawn, her strong hands that had lain relaxed, began to clench. She must leave with a brave heart for the sake of her husband and the boys. Elimelech sought only their safety. She must be strong for him. She must think of their going as of a gay adventure. After all, they would not be gone long. And what a rejoicing when they returned! Her lips actually smiled as she pictured it.

So it came to pass that Naomi made ready for their departure with her old joyous spirit.

It seemed as though all Bethlehem came to the eastern gateway to see the travellers start. A few of the younger men spoke eagerly of following them; many of the older ones shook their heads fearfully over the enterprise; but all said farewell sorrowfully.

From the women there were loud lamentations.

"Who will bring cheer to our hearts now that Naomi is leaving us?"

"A light has gone from our city now that 'The Winsome One' has departed!"

"Now let the famine indeed devour us since the

beauty of the house of Elimelech shall no more grace our eyes! ”

So chanted the old women, while the younger ones clung to Naomi with tears.

But her clear laughter rang out above the farewells. Her cheeks were scarlet and her lustrous black hair glistened in the sunlight. She seemed to be everywhere: a touch here, a jest there; a kiss on the upturned face of a child; the quick clinging of her arms around an old form; a word of courage, of comfort, of hope; a bit of raillery, a gay retort . . . as her bright scarf flashed in and out among the crowd.

“And when we return,” her laughing voice called, “there shall be a great feast. We shall come back rich, shall we not, Elimelech? And how the wine shall flow that night! And the singing and the laughter and the dancing! Never such a feast in Bethlehem as Naomi shall give thee on her return! ”

As far as she could see the group by the gateway in the wall, Naomi turned again and again and again to wave her scarf brightly in farewell. Then, when the hill had hidden them, she set her face strongly toward the mountains of Moab that rose, all purple and pink, behind the Dead Sea.

The journey itself was not so difficult as she had feared. She kept pointing out things of interest, exclaiming, singing, entertaining the others as they went. They walked steadily each day, her

fine vigour keeping pace with that of her husband and the lads. They slept where night overtook them under the open sky.

At the end of five days they found themselves with the Jordan and the Dead Sea behind them; with the mountains of Moab, that from Judah had been wrapped in magic colours, now looming close, cragged, seared, formidable, against the sunset.

There were no green, waving fields of grain as there had been in plentiful summers in Judah; no neat, fruitful gardens with small white houses gleaming through the vines. Here were wide, rocky, pasture-lands, and long, hilly vineyards; with small patches of wheat dotted between scattered, transient-looking villages.

Their journey was over. They had arrived. Their weary feet stood upon alien soil.

During the next days Naomi forced her homesick heart to cheerfulness. Now that the novelty of the journey was over, the boys were restless and quarrelsome; while Elimelech, bewildered by new conditions, uncertain now of the wisdom of his plan, was moody and irritable.

It was Naomi's practical wisdom that sent the boys to interview the herdsmen and Elimelech to try to find work in a vineyard, while she searched the nearest village for a place of shelter.

By the third evening Elimelech had been engaged as a vine-dresser, and Naomi had found an empty house for which she had driven a shrewd bargain.

A few days later, Mahlon and Chilion became shepherd's helpers.

And so the new life began. Naomi cleaned the house within and arranged the rough furniture Elimelech fashioned in the evenings. She planted grapevines by the doorway.

She strove to make friends with her neighbours. The Moabitish dialect, enough like that of the Canaanites to be intelligible, still sounded harsh to her ears; the women themselves were foreign in their manner, in their way of living; more than this, they were strangers to Jehovah for they worshipped Chemosh. But in spite of all, Naomi's warm kindness reached out to them. And, like iron to a magnet, they came to her.

They gathered around her doorway to listen to her songs and laughter. They came to hear of the people and the country beyond the mountains and the sea, whence she had come. They came, as they had done in Judah, with their small joys or their hidden sorrows, to the house of Naomi for sympathy and cheer.

At the end of the first year, Naomi spoke to her husband. Her eyes were bright with hope.

"And we shall go now, back unto Bethlehem?" she asked. "Hast thou not heard that Jehovah hath visited His people and given them bread? Shall we go soon, Elimelech?"

But Elimelech shook his head.

"Wouldst thou put thy hand in the lion's mouth

a second time? Art thou so sure there is bread in Judah?" he answered. "Let us tarry here one year more."

Naomi sang steadily that day to keep the tears of disappointment from overflowing.

At the end of the second year she spoke with glad assurance.

"And we shall go back now, soon, my husband?"

Elimelech looked thoughtful.

"Wouldst thou have us return as poor as when we left?" he again demurred. "I am only now able to save a little money. Let us tarry yet another year and then we shall go back with full hands."

That night the mountains of Moab began to look like the walls of a prison.

So the third year began. Mahlon and Chilion were young men now. Sometimes as she saw them laughing with the Moabitish maidens a sharp fear struck her. But she thrust it from her. It was her over-anxious mother's heart that tolerated such a thought. Her sons, born and nurtured almost within sight of the Hill of Zion, whose baby lips had lisped the prayers of Israel—her sons to wed with the heathen! What impossible absurdity.

All the same, she talked much of the feasting there would be when they were all back in Bethlehem. And sometimes even hinted gaily that there might be wedding suppers then. She spoke with

gentle archness of the maidens there. Of Chuza and Mary; of Reba and Serenth. Never did she for a moment allow the memories of Bethlehem to grow dim. And Jehovah? At morning and at noon and at sunset the prayers of Israel rose from one house of the heathen village; and many a song of Zion floated out along its streets.

Naomi bore her third year of exile as she had the others, bravely and buoyantly. Her hair was still glossy and black; her lips still scarlet and laughing; her nimble feet still tripped lightly about her duties.

One day when the third vintage season was at its height, Elimelech left for his work later than usual. He complained of a sharp pain in his breast. When Naomi came in from a long walk to the far distant well in the late afternoon she found him seated at the table, his head bowed upon his arms. When she touched his hands, they were already cold.

They buried him on the hillside in Moab. Strangers' hands helped to lift him into a stranger's grave. The next night Naomi sat very still in the darkness, alone, clasping and unclasping her hands. She and Elimelech had loved each other. That he should not be with her when she returned to Bethlehem seemed a fact so dark and agonizing, that her mind refused to grasp it.

In the morning, however, her eyes showed no traces of tears. She faced her sons steadily.



There was no need to tarry longer in Moab. They would arise and go now to their own city.

The young men seemed loath to discuss it, or even to meet her eyes.

"There is always bread, at least, in Moab," was the burden of their response.

A few nights later, while she stood in the doorway looking off to the sunset, Naomi saw Mahlon coming down the street with a young woman beside him. She had often seen him walking with her before and knew her name to be Orpah. But something told her that this was different. It was the instinct which informs a mother when another woman has supplanted her in the heart of her first-born. Naomi suddenly knew that Mahlon was bringing home his wife.

And so it proved. Orpah was small and plump and childish, and Naomi, in spite of her bitter distress, took her to her bosom. She knew now why Mahlon did not wish to return to Bethlehem.

Only a few months had passed when Chilion brought home another maiden from the next village whose name was Ruth. She was tall and dark and slender. She stood hesitantly upon Naomi's threshold. Her soft eyes searched those of her mother-in-law.

Naomi stood a moment, stunned under this second crushing blow to all her dearest hopes. Bethlehem would be now but a memory to her sons. Henceforth they would be men of Moab.



The mothers of their children would be followers of Chemosh. Something stronger than the mountains now shut her from Judah forever. A fierce resentment burned through her. An anger, the like of which she had never known, seemed to tear her heart. But her native kindness triumphed. She kissed Ruth and drew her into the house.

The year wore away. Naomi's hair had some grey threads now, and fine lines shadowed her eyes and lips. She did not laugh so often nor move so buoyantly as she had done. She settled quietly into the new life that her sons had thrust upon her. Only now and then her eyes would sparkle and a flash of her old merriment would brighten the work of the household.

She taught her daughters-in-law the finer things about cooking and home-making that they did not know. She smoothed small irritations between them and her sons. These maidens were now of her family. They were young. They had a right to be happy.

She sang the songs of Israel as she worked, and sometimes Ruth raised her voice to follow them:

*"Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place  
In all generations. . . .  
Make us glad according to the days  
Wherein thou hast afflicted us. . . .  
And let the beauty of the Lord our God  
Be upon us. . . ."*

Naomi told them the story of Moses, the man of God, who had written the psalm. Other stories of Israel's heroes and bits of the temple-worship, she repeated in the dusk as they sat together in the doorway.

One hope alone had lighted her heart when her sons had wedded the two daughters of Moab. This was a hope, pitifully stripped of the far, holy expectation of every Hebrew woman; and yet—a little warm, moving body in her arms; a small man-child to whom she could be nurse—Naomi knew that this would bring consolation to her bruised heart as nothing else could, even though such a child of a heathen mother could never become the awaited Messiah nor even of His line.

But the years crept on and this joy did not come. Orpah, the childlike, the impulsive, lamented loudly as the three women worked together. Ruth's sweet face grew thin and wistful and her deep eyes held the look of a rooted sorrow.

And at the sight of their pain, Naomi rose gallantly to relieve it. She put down the dull, constant sadness of her own heart. She buried it. She became again with conscious effort the gay Naomi of the old days in Bethlehem.

The laughter that she constantly now evoked; the playful little jests at which Mahlon and Chilion slapped their great thighs in glee,—all this was, now that her heart was heavy, a costly gift. But Naomi offered it gladly. The little house became

the centre of village life. In spite of themselves, Orpah and Ruth forgot to grieve. There was always light and laughter in their dwelling.

Sometimes when she was alone, Naomi allowed the merciful cloak of quietness to fall upon her weary spirit. The tears came, wrung from her homesick, disappointed soul. Once Ruth came upon her unexpectedly and found her so. When Naomi looked up startled, the girl said softly: "I have often thought thee brave, but now I know."

From that hour, Ruth's eyes clung to hers in a worshipful understanding.

As the slow years passed, one by one, a new saying grew up in the village. "Shall a daughter-in-law love her mother-in-law?" They would quote the old proverb and then add laughingly; "Yes, if the mother-in-law be Naomi."

At last there came the autumn which rounded out the tenth year since they had left Bethlehem. Naomi had found it harder than ever that summer to keep up the gay pretenses to which she had schooled herself. But she realized with a small satisfaction that she had never been outwardly more joyous.

One evening Mahlon came home flushed and trembling. A fever was spreading among the shepherds. A week later, Chilion became a victim. The three women nursed the sufferers tirelessly. It was Naomi at last who saw the end come. The

young wives were sleeping, exhausted after long weeks of anxious vigil.

They buried Mahlon and Chilion on the hillside beside Elimelech.

Naomi's raven hair whitened through one anguished night.

For days she lay prostrate, strangely unable to rise. A change had passed over her face. It was old now. There were deep lines there. The neighbours came and looked at her and asked one another—"Can this be the Joyous One?" And they went their ways softly, as from some sacred thing.

For they recognized that the face of the daughter of Israel bore a look of strange beauty. It was all written there: the steady courage; the unquenchable spirit; the laughter wrung from tears; the small sacrifices born of an unselfish heart; the tenderness that had fought its way up through bitterness; the small victories that had been wrested from defeat to gladden the hearts of those she had loved—all these were written upon Naomi's face as though the delicate etching of the years upon her soul had suddenly been transferred there.

There was now no more need for fight. Naomi was like a scarred veteran—relaxed and purposeless when the long campaign is over.

When her strength returned she tried to comfort her daughters-in-law.

"It grieveth me sore that the hand of the Lord is against me, for *your* sakes," she said again and again.

But she spoke with quiet assurance of their future. They had their own homes—their own mothers to whom they would return. And they were young. All life lay before them. They would marry again and find peace and joy. As for her, she would go back, at last, to her own country.

The days of her preparation were sad ones. Orpah wept constantly as they tore up the house and sorted their small possessions. Ruth's eyes followed Naomi wherever she went.

At last she was ready. With Orpah and Ruth on either side, she walked up the street for the last time. The neighbours crowded about to say good-bye, and called until she had passed far out of the town and on up the rocky road that led toward Judah.

She was going home at last. But the ten cruel, alien years had robbed her of all that would have made the home-going sweet. All the happy anticipation, and the eager hopes of those early days—dead, dead! Buried in three graves in Moab along with her youth and her heart.

She felt a soft pressure on her arm. It was Ruth's touch. And with it Naomi's numbed spirit awoke to a new pain. She realized that one last sorrow was reserved for her, of which she had not been, until now, fully aware.

For Orpah she had the tenderness that the strong have for the weak. She had guided her, taught her, petted and consoled her. But for Ruth! This girl who had paused hesitantly in her doorway seven years before; this woman of the exquisite reticences; of the delicate sympathy; this young Moabitess with the soft, dark, understanding eyes, who had gently, unobtrusively ministered to her, who had done her bidding unquestioningly during all these years; who had quietly copied her ways and discovered the secrets of her thoughts,—for Ruth she felt a deep, dependent love. She was the daughter not of her own flesh, but even more truly of her heart. And she, too, would soon be left behind.

They had reached the sharp turn of the road. Behind lay Moab, far ahead stretched the lonely journey. Naomi stopped and spoke to them bravely.

“Go back, my daughters,” she said calmly. “Return each to your mother’s house. May the Lord deal kindly with you as ye have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you, in the house of her husband.”

Orpah sobbed hysterically.

“Surely,” she cried impulsively, “we shall return with thee unto thy people! ”

Naomi smiled as one does at the foolish urgency of a child. With a superb effort she held her face





"GO BACK MY DAUGHTERS," SAID NAOMI CALMLY. "RETURN  
EACH TO YOUR MOTHER'S HOUSE."





to the lines of its old humour. Her tone was almost playful.

"Nay, my daughters," she replied, "turn again. Why would ye go with me? Shall I yet have other sons that may be your husbands? Even if I had, would ye tarry for them till they were grown? Would ye stay for them, from having husbands?"

Then the heavy shadow fell again as she continued: "Nay, my daughters. But it grieveth me much for *your* sakes that the hand of the Lord is gone out against me!"

She drew Orpah toward her. The girl kissed her over and over and then flung herself, weeping, down the path. She did not look back.

Naomi raised her eyes to those of Ruth. She saw two shining pools of adoration. Suddenly she felt young arms around her, crushing her close; hands, tenderly curving hands, pressing her sunken cheek against a smooth round one; she felt lips against her own, clinging passionately as a lover's might. She felt thrilling through her weary body, from the contact, the strength of youth.

She closed her eyes. She prayed for courage. Then she said gently, "Behold thy sister-in-law is gone back unto her people and unto her gods: return thou after thy sister-in-law."

But the arms only clung the more tightly. The clasp had in it no hint of renunciation. Steadfastness, rather, and a great resolve.

Naomi lifted her head. Upon the darkness of

her bruised and heavy spirit a hope had arisen like the morning star. Unbelievable, wonderful! And as she looked into Ruth's deep, lustrous eyes, she knew that the incredible was true. Out of the dead past had come this living joy; out of her long, patient, sorrowing years had blossomed this deathless love that was to companion her through all the days to come.

She knew it, even before the words fell from Ruth's lips, making the slow, strange accent for the first time sweet to Naomi's ears.

For the young Moabiteess looked into the eyes of her mother-in-law, and cried: "Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and *thy God, my God*."

"Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me."

V

*THE BRIDE OF CANA*

*“And the third day there was a marriage in Cana of Galilee; and the mother of Jesus was there: And both Jesus was called, and his disciples, to the marriage.”—JOHN 2:1, 2.*

## V

### THE BRIDE OF CANA



LIZABETH woke suddenly in the full morning light. A long band of gold slanted across the floor and burnished the silken wings of the white doves on the tapestry screen at the foot of her bed.

This meant that the sun was already well up above the Galilæan hills. A confusion of cheerful, homely sounds came from the village street; little John calling to his goats as he took them to pasture; the ring of Obed's hammer as he worked at the new house across the way; the slow grating of old Joanna's millstones next door; and the high, clear, teasing laughter of Dorcas and Esther as they went to the well.

Elizabeth sat up, her eyes full of a startled wonder. Another yesterday had slipped off into the long tale of years past. A new day was here. Tomorrow she was to marry Philip. *Tomorrow!*

She pushed her long, loosened braids back from her face with a weary gesture. She was still incredulous. Still dully inclined to believe that this anticipation which now had the semblance of a

reality, was but another of those countless mirage-like dreams from which she had so often wakened flushed and joyous, only to sink again into quiet, hidden despair.

Her wedding-day, *tomorrow*? Incredible and yet true. One more night in the familiar room with the white doves, one more night alone in the echoing house, and then she would be a bride, a wife, Philip's at last.

She rose quickly and dressed. The day would be full. There was a little more sewing, a few last arrangements to make for the transference of her goods from her house to Philip's; there would be many, many interruptions from the friendly, gossiping neighbours who would be stopping at her house all day long; the gay banter of the excited girls who would walk in the bridal procession: all this and much more would fill the new day.

And yet, instead of being eager, Elizabeth felt curiously loath to begin its duties. The heavy apathy which had lain upon her spirit for the last weeks still clung to her. It was as though all the fires of her heart, once so warm and bright, had died.

Dorcas and Esther passed again with their water-jars on their shoulders. Vivid, gay young things in the first fresh bloom of youth. The sight of them tortured Elizabeth, for it turned her dull heaviness into sharp pain. That was what she had lost. Her youth. The beautiful golden years when



love beat high in her breast, when she could have been a glowing, joyous bride, had been stolen from her. "The wedding of the old lovers," they were calling it in Cana, and without resentment Elizabeth accepted the words from her neighbours' lips. For it was the truth. She was twenty-nine years old; Philip was thirty-five. All the others of their ages had been married these twelve or fourteen years, had many children now playing about their doors.

It was when Elizabeth was fifteen, a rosy, laughing girl that Philip, twenty-one then, and very strong and manly, had asked for her in marriage. She remembered their meetings at the old well. Philip's flushed, handsome face bending above her as he spoke of his love.

"As a lily among thorns," he would tell her softly, "so is my love among the daughters! "

And she would whisper back: "As the apple-tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons! "

And all her heart had gone out to him. For, surely there had never been such a lover as Philip. So gentle and tender and yet so on fire with his passion.

Elizabeth had embroidered the white doves during those months of perfect anticipation, and sewed on the white linens she would take with her as a bride.

Then with the waning of summer a sudden prob-

lem presented itself. Philip's older brother, who had gone, years before, to seek his fortune in Jerusalem, returned to his father's with his wife and family. He demanded the rights of the first-born to the small farm outside the village from which Philip had expected to earn the living for himself and his bride.

There had been hot dissension, but Philip had yielded at last, partly because of his youth, and partly because he hated to quarrel. He and Elizabeth talked it over each evening. Philip could find other work. He was so strong and clever. They could wait one year. Philip laughed teasingly as he kissed her.

"I would wait for thee as long as Jacob did for Rachel," he remarked.

Elizabeth had made a pretty mouth at him.

"*Fourteen years!* I should be an old woman by that time," she said archly. "But by next year I may not have lost all my good looks! Perhaps thou wilt still wish to marry me!"

And they laughed again in gay confidence.

But that next year was but the beginning of troubles. It seemed indeed as though life had turned into an invisible archer who hurled dart after dart upon them from ambush.

Philip's search for work did not prosper. His very eagerness was against him. He changed nervously from this to that during the year. He wanted a little home for Elizabeth, for now his

father's house was already overcrowded. But at the end of the twelve months he had failed miserably. They must wait one year more.

His brother was making a fine living from the farm. But Philip and Elizabeth decided there must be no bitter repining over that.

"He is the oldest and he has his family already dependent upon him," Philip would say kindly. Elizabeth agreed and turned to new encouragement.

"Thou wilt have success this year, Philip," she would reply hopefully. "See how quickly the time has gone already! I shall be busy, too. I shall make new cushions this winter and another screen. Oh, our home will be sweet! Thou wilt still—perhaps—wish to marry me next year, Philip? Thou wilt not have changed thy mind?" She begged laughingly.

And Philip laughed, too, very tenderly as he drew her close.

"Yea, I shall hunt hard to find a new maiden. I shall seek one with hair like tow and a quarrelsome tongue. I shall find one so cross and homely that I should never want to leave my work to go home to her. Then just think how rich I should become! "

So they rallied their drooping spirits.

But before the new year was gone, sorrow had come to the home of Elizabeth. Her mother, a little, quiet, busy woman, succumbed to fever. At

sixteen Elizabeth felt fall upon her shoulders the care of the big family. It was to her now that everyone turned: her father in his grief, the garrulous grandmother who was almost blind, the younger brothers and sister who crowded about her frightened and crying. She had no time for her own tears. She took up the burden which her mother had laid down. She was changed over night from a carefree girl to a serious woman. It puzzled her. She felt like a child, who, after receiving nothing but love all its life, is suddenly struck a cruel blow.

It seemed now as though nothing was stable and happy and secure. All her world tottered upon its foundations. She was certain of this when she overheard her father telling Philip calmly that now she could not be spared and that perhaps he had better ask for another maiden who would be free to marry him at once.

When Philip found her, later, by the old well, where she had run blindly in her anguish, he kissed her white cheeks back to warmth. Her father's words had angered him.

"Does he not know," he began, "that I would wait for thee as long as Jacob waited for—"

"Don't!" Elizabeth broke in with a sob. "I cannot bear to hear thee say it!"

"Why?" Philip asked in amazement. "Dost thou doubt me?"

"Oh, no," Elizabeth wept, "I could never

doubt thee. But now with us it may even be so long as that. It will be years, *years*," she cried in a burst of despair. "Little Enoch is only two and Sarah four. And no girl older than I! Oh, Philip, *must* this come upon us? We were so happy! "

"If Jehovah wills," Philip said through set teeth, "we must wait. But I shall still have thee for my wife! Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it! "

After that, they jested no more about the waiting. Elizabeth made no more coy speeches and Philip did not laugh teasingly as he had done before. Her father's blunt words had somehow killed the old flashes of provocative merriment between them. They both began to feel the heart sickness which comes of hope deferred.

And so the years went on. Elizabeth spent the wealth of her womanliness upon the motherless household. Her days were crowded with heavier work than she had ever known. She learned to serve patiently and to give without thought of return. She learned to sing when her heart was heavy, and to make laughter for others when her own voice broke later in a sob. She learned the great woman's secret of taking four walls and diverse human beings and making of them *a home*. Her father grew content again with his lot. Little Sarah and baby Enoch were tenderly cared for. Above them the row of brothers small and larger,

that reached up to Elizabeth herself, grew and flourished.

She did not see Philip so often now. Her father thought their frequent meetings improper when no one knew when the wedding could be. Philip submitted to his wish, but unwillingly.

Sometimes when they were together Elizabeth wore a flower in her smooth, dark hair and talked in her old bright fashion. Sometimes they sat quiet, thinking of all that might have been. For Philip was doing well now in his work. He had bought a piece of land for himself near the village. There was, moreover, room for her now in his father's house, for his brother's family had moved out to the farm.

But in the home of Elizabeth there was literally no room for Philip. Besides, as she told him shyly, she was already so heavily laden with burdens that her physical strength would not be equal to any added ones that marriage might bring. They talked it over from every angle. There was no other way. They must accept this strange disaster to all their hopes and be patient under it.

Ten years passed. Ten long, slowly-moving years. The waiting of Philip and Elizabeth became a by-word in Cana. If a wedding were delayed the neighbours said they hoped it would not be another case of the "old lovers." The young girls discussed Elizabeth's quiet resignation.

"But she does not love Philip as I love Jethro,"



one happy bride-to-be of fifteen would state with conviction. "She *couldn't*, and go on working at home the way she does and seeing Philip only once in three Sabbaths! Mother says Elizabeth has been betrothed since she was younger than I am now. How *can* she wait till she is old? . . ."

"And consider Philip!" another would intervene. "He could marry a young girl now if he chose. He is still handsome and his work goes well."

"I do not believe they will ever marry," another would predict. "They will go on as they are now till the end. Some day an old, old man and woman will be sitting at the well, and people will say: 'There sit the Old Lovers who are still waiting to wed!'"

Elizabeth heard much of this gossip. Sometimes a stray sentence floated to her from the street; sometimes the children, overhearing it, brought it innocently back to her. She only set her lips in their quiet line and went on about her work.

But at the end of the tenth year, as it often happens, the big household suddenly scattered. The older boys left home—one to sea, two to Jerusalem, one to be a soldier under the Empire, one to Damascus. And little Sarah, at fourteen, all laughter and eagerness and hopeful plans was wed to a young inn-keeper at Nazareth and had taken Enoch with her to help them.

Elizabeth had allowed none of her own bitter tears to drop on little Sarah's wedding-dress. She



had reserved them for the darkness and her lonely pillow. No least shadow of her own sacrifice had darkened Sarah's happy going. She had given her sister a mother's blessing as she left.

But after she had watched her go, all aglow with the tender promise of her youth, borne off in triumph to her bridegroom's house, Elizabeth had sent for Philip. There was a great weariness in her voice as she told him quietly that she had asked her father to release him absolutely from the old betrothal.

"I will not see thy life wasted, Philip," she said. "And I am not yet free. I cannot tell when I shall be. The grandmother is bedridden now and father's palsy grows worse each day. I must give all my time and strength to them. It is my duty and it may last for years. Go, Philip. I feel old and saddened. I am no fit wife for thee. Thou couldst forget. Go, and find thyself someone young and happy and . . ."

But Philip's lips were white and stern.

"Look at me, Elizabeth!" he answered firmly. "Look into my eyes. Never let me hear such words as those cross thy lips again. Thou art weary and discouraged, tonight, but, remember this—I have waited ten years for thee. I shall wait ten more, if need be."

But that had not been necessary. At the end of two more years Elizabeth was alone in the old house. First the grandmother had gone, and a

few months later her father had followed. She was free at last.

Such was the story of the years which lay behind Elizabeth; the years which had led slowly—oh, how slowly—up to this day in which she now found herself confused and unbelieving, preparing for her wedding.

Old Joanna came in while Elizabeth was making her barley cakes for breakfast.

“And so thou canst say *tomorrow* at last?” began the old woman. “Who would ever have thought it could come! They say that Philip’s father hath invited all Cana and half Nazareth to the wedding supper. There are twelve women asked to serve besides the servants he hath hired,” she went on with garrulous relish. “But thou canst not blame him. Philip waited nearly fifteen years! It is a pity thou hast lost all thy colour. Thou wouldst have made a lovely bride at sixteen. Yea, verily the ways of Jehovah are strange! We dare not question them. They say Philip hath had thy wedding-dress sent from Jerusalem! Is that true? How many jewels hast thou for thy veil? As I said at the time, thou shouldst not have given so many to Sarah. Hast thou . . .”

“Wilt thou have these cakes?” Elizabeth asked quietly, pressing her breakfast upon the visitor. “I find I cannot eat.”

Old Joanna munched them comfortably. “Nor could I for days before my wedding!” she

chuckled. "Too much joy and excitement. I was young, though, of course. Just turned fourteen. When thou art older thou dost not feel as—"

Elizabeth spoke suddenly. "There are Dorcas and Esther at the door. I must open to them."

All through the day there was much coming and going at the house of Elizabeth; but it seemed to her that in each attempted kindness, each curious question, each laughing congratulation, there was a little shaft, a goad, a tiny barb to pierce her heart. They were all her neighbours and she loved them, but their interest in the wedding she knew had in it something of pity for her and Philip and something of—if not contempt, at least a mild, amused superiority. She read it in the eyes of her old friends who were now these many years happy wives and mothers. She saw it on the faces of the young girls who were already planning their own weddings. She was shut off from all these by a wall of difference. The years of waiting had set her apart, and Philip, too, from the sweet, ordinary course of life. Their courtship and marriage would always be cited as a proverb like that of Jacob and Rachel. Something to admire, perhaps, in the long waiting, but much more, naturally, to be feared. They would be a warning and an example of misfortune.

Even the display at the wedding-supper, which Philip's father was bent upon making, would elicit only friendly jests. No wonder he wanted to make

a show when the Old Ones were married at last! That is what the guests would say to each other as they ate and drank.

Elizabeth tried bravely to put aside such thoughts. She tried to feel buoyant, excited, happily eager for the morrow. But as the day wore on she gave it up. The dull sense of having outlived her youth and all its warmth of feeling persisted. She felt only a great passivity.

When Philip came that evening to walk with her for the last time before they were husband and wife, Elizabeth marvelled at the change in him. He seemed even to have lost his slight stoop. He was erect now, his eyes flashing as they did in the old days. His hands shook a little as they touched hers. He had forgotten the years of waiting. He had suddenly become the young lover again, with his passion strong within him.

He talked with touching eagerness of the preparations for the feast. Elizabeth listened quietly, unstirred. He spoke of the guests and she feigned an interest she did not feel until suddenly she raised her head.

"Didst thou say Mary of Nazareth?" she asked.

"Yes," Philip answered. "Father hath invited her to be one of twelve to assist with the serving. He was an old friend of Joseph, her husband. And he hath also bidden her oldest son Jesus, and some of His friends to the feast."

"I am glad," Elizabeth answered quickly.

“ Mary hath been kind to Sarah; and this son, this Jesus, is beginning Himself to teach, they say. Sarah knows Him and she thinks He has strange powers. I saw Him once. It was when Sarah’s baby came. I had left old Joanna here with Father and Grandmother had gone to Nazareth. I had had no sleep all the night before, and I worked all the next night over Sarah. But in the morning when everything was over and there was no more need of me—a neighbour was to look after them—I said good-bye and started up the road, home. And, Philip, something seemed to break within me. I felt crazed with bitterness. Sarah was so happy and the baby so sweet, and it seemed as though disappointment was ever to be my portion! I have never known such despair as I felt that day. And then, on the road, I met this son of Mary’s, this Jesus. He only looked at me and smiled and passed on, but somehow—”

She paused, hesitant. “Thou wilt think me foolish. I have never spoken of it before, but somehow as He looked on me I felt different. I grew brave and quiet again, able to go on—waiting.”

Philip’s answer was to draw her to him.

“But it’s over now! All the waiting. Over at last!” He was like an exuberant boy whose mind can dwell only upon the subject of his joy. “And tomorrow we shall have a wedding that shall surpass any ever seen in Cana! And the wedding-

dress! Wait till thou seest it! No city bride will ever look finer than thou."

Elizabeth lay awake that night watching the moonlight on the pale white doves. She was glad Philip was so happy, but it made her the more fearful. What if her heart never woke again? What if she could not rekindle her old fires? Then Philip would be cheated and she would die of the pain of disappointing him.

Was there any cure for a tired spirit? Bodies grew old; the strength and flexibility went out of young muscles never to return; the time for strong physical endurance passed. Perhaps it was the same with hearts.

Or perhaps youthful love was like the tide, flooding in strong and eager. And then, if unsatisfied, slowly ebbing, leaving the life-sands dry and bare.

The sun rose brightly on the wedding morning of the "Old Lovers." The village seemed to come astir earlier than usual. Everyone was talking and laughing as they went along the street. They were anticipating the pleasant excitement of the procession that evening and the feast.

Elizabeth heard old Joanna call to a passer-by: "A fine day for the Old Ones!"

And the answer came, with its little edge of amusement: "There hath been time for the weather-prophets to arrange for a fine one!"

They did not mean to be unkind. It was only that they could not resist comment on a thing so



strange as a wedding delayed for nearly fifteen years! On a bride who should, by this time, have had a daughter of her own ready for marriage.

Elizabeth rose and dressed carefully. Some time in the morning would come the ceremonious entrance of the messengers from Philip bearing her bridal dress and ornaments and the ointment and perfumes.

There was no breakfast to make, for she must fast until evening. But there were the prayers of Atonement with which her mind must be occupied most of the day. She knelt facing Jerusalem and recited softly the solemn, stately words of the confession. But beneath the familiar petitions which came mechanically to her lips, there ran a craving cry in her heart. Would that Jehovah in His mercy would bring back warmth and brightness to her spirit! Would that this heaviness, this dull pain of an eternity of lost yesterdays might be lifted! Would that Jehovah would restore to her the years which the locust had eaten!

The messengers arrived. The bridal gown with all its expensive ornaments was spread upon the bed. She smiled tenderly at Philip's extravagance. He had sent perfumes enough for a lifetime. There were other gifts besides; fruit and flowers and linen garments of exquisite texture. No one could criticize the generosity of the bridegroom.

In the early evening, while the neighbours swarmed about the rooms trying to be helpful,



Elizabeth stood before her mirror and let down her long black hair until it fell about her shoulders as a maiden bride's must hang.

Little Dorcas, who at thirteen was already betrothed, cried out in surprise: "Why, Elizabeth, thou hast a big stripe of white in thy hair! Didst thou know?"

"Yes, I knew," said Elizabeth quietly.

"How funny! A bride with white in her hair!" Dorcas appealed to the others.

"Hush!" commanded her mother sharply, with a glance at Elizabeth's set face.

They helped her into the bridal dress, exclaiming at its beauty. With her own hands Elizabeth adjusted the "attire" about her waist and the crown of fresh myrtle leaves that she had preferred to the golden imitation. Then over all was thrown the long white veil of betrothal that would not be raised until Philip's own hands lifted it in the hush of the bridal chamber. Elizabeth was ready.

The early dusk had grown swiftly to darkness. The young girls who had been running in and out were gone hastily to their own homes to don their last bit of finery for the procession.

Old Joanna kept her post at the door, looking up the street for the first sight of the bridegroom's couriers. The other women fluttered about, talking in high voices. Elizabeth stood alone for a moment in the room with the white doves. She thought of her mother. If she could but have felt

her living presence, her blessing upon her as she went out into the new life. She was so alone. She thought of her father and the grandmother. The house seemed heavy with death. It seemed to give forth thin echoes of voices that were no longer in it. She thought of the big noisy happy family she had served. All scattered now, leaving only memories behind them. She needed them and they were not here. Sarah had a new baby and could not come. The older boys were far away. The two younger ones had indeed come back to town for the wedding festivities. She would see them later.

But for any close, tender contact, for any loving family intimacy to surround her and bless her as she left the old home—there was none. She was a desolate bride.

A shout came from the doorway. It was old Joanna peering from her vantage point into the darkness.

“Here they come! Look! Thou canst see the torches! And the flutes! Dost thou hear them? Oh, it will be a great procession. Call Elizabeth. Tell her they have started!”

The sounds came clearly through the night. Philip and his groomsmen were on their way to her. The neighbours were all thronging the streets. The maidens were waiting ready to circle about her when she emerged from the house. High above the drums and shouting rose the clear song of the flutes. Nearer and nearer . . . nearer . . .

The women were leading her to the doorway. A glare of torchlights blinded her. A great tumultuous shouting deafened her. She was all at once in the centre of it while the tide of light and noise swept her back with it along the streets. Before her swayed the dim, graceful, dancing forms of the maidens. Then the flutes grew clear again and the girls' voices rose singing:

*"Her eyelids are not stained with blue,  
Her red cheeks are her own;  
Her hair hangs waving as it grew,  
Her grace were wealth alone!"*

Elizabeth knew it well. It was sung at every wedding. But now the words hurt. For they seemed a mockery. Her eyelids were stained with tears. Her cheeks were white. She walked along quietly, shut off by the flowing veil as though by a ghostly partition. She could not even see Philip who was ahead with his groomsmen. She went on slowly, wearily, still terrified by the unbroken quiet of her heart.

All at once the shouting increased deafeningly. The torches again became a confused glare. They had reached the house. Elizabeth felt herself conducted through lines of laughing, bowing men and women on to the doorway where Philip met her and drew her inside. His hands trembled as they caught hers. They were hot against her still, cool ones.

He led her proudly to the room reserved for the women and seated her on the soft rug-covered dais prepared for her. The other women and maidens who were invited to the house, crowded in and found seats on the rug-covered floor and cushioned ledges. A door gave into the room where the feast was spread for the men and where the singing and dancing would take place.

Elizabeth could see the women who were to serve, carrying food to the table and chatting importantly to each other as they worked. She watched for the form of Mary as she went and came. So gentle in her movements, so quiet of speech, so tender and smiling as she looked upon the group that clustered round the bridegroom.

Terenth, one of Elizabeth's old friends, was also one of those who served. At intervals she dashed into the women's room and gave them titbits of news.

"The room's full now, and still more keep coming," she cried excitedly. "Philip's father hath invited all Cana! He's treating all the poor out by the side doorway now. Ugh! but they guzzle down the good wine. Thou shouldst see Philip with his crown of flowers! He looks not a day beyond twenty-one. Verily, he is the happy man tonight!"

In a few minutes more she was back.

"They've had to put more tables around the walls," she announced. "Philip's father seems beside himself with joy. He's out in front asking all

who pass to come in to his son's wedding. We start to serve now! "

The hired musicians made their way with difficulty through the crowded hall to their place in the feast-room, and the conventional festivities began. Between the songs, rose the voice of Philip's father, joyful with wine, pressing food upon his guests, and that of the governor of the feast calling for more dancing, for riddles, asking this one and that to contribute to the entertainment. Threading their way amongst the crowd, moved the busy women and the servants, bearing the food on great platters or laden with pitchers of wine.

Toasts were given and drunk. She could hear Philip's voice with a new note of possessive pride in it. He was a bridegroom at last.

Terenth came in again with refreshments for the women.

"There are many strangers," she commented excitedly. "Four men are sitting with Nathanael, and he keeps calling one of them *Rabbi*. He is Mary's son from Nazareth, but I didn't know He was a rabbi! Philip's father is so excited. We can't bring things in fast enough to please him. He is mightily lavish with the wine. He almost poured it down those beggars' throats at the side door, this evening! Philip will have to go clear to the new vineyards for more for tomorrow night. Thou shouldst see how the guests eat! "

She ran out laughing, but it seemed only a

moment until she was back. Her face was blanched.

"*The wine is done!*" she gasped. "There isn't another drop and the feast but barely begun! We thought there were two more vats of it and they are empty! What can we do?" She wrung her hands. "And the governor of the feast is calling for more this minute! Who is to tell him? No one knows how it has happened. But there is *none!* Not a sip or a drop left in the house! Elizabeth, *what can we do?*" There was desperation in her tone.

At her first words Elizabeth had started in surprise. Now she sat tense with hands gripped together. No more wine! The feast begun in riotous plenty, was to end in poverty and disgrace. Was this the last master-stroke of fate against their plans—hers and Philip's?

"*What shall we do?*" Terenth cried again, while from the other room they could hear renewed shouts from Philip's father and the governor.

"Wine! Let us have more wine! Wine that maketh glad the heart! Wine for my guests! Wine!"

Elizabeth signed to Terenth to come near her.

"Tell Mary of Nazareth!" she whispered. "She is always calm and wise. She will somehow know how to tell the governor and the rest when it has to be known."



Then when Terenth had rushed away and the chatter of awed comment and criticism and speculation was in full flow about her, Elizabeth sat speechless and stunned behind her veil.

This was no small calamity that was about to fall upon them. It was a lifelong disgrace for Philip and his father. Never again could they hold up their heads in the village. No matter whose the mistake had been, the burden of the reproach would rest upon them. And no one would ever let them forget. So long as they lived, they would feel the sting of it. This flagrant breach of hospitality, this unprecedented failure to make good the promise of their lavish invitations. No apology could be offered or accepted. There would be only the ugly fact to speak for itself.

Every place they went there would be for them sly references, whispered reminders, a cynical wink, a tongue in the cheek.

For herself, Elizabeth knew it would not so much matter. If the burden were only hers alone, it would be but one more to bear. But that this blow should fall upon Philip! Philip, with the proud ring in his voice, his new air of joyful possession, his sudden erect bearing. Philip, so boyishly happy and exultant! Oh, it was insupportable anguish for this to come upon him on his wedding night after his years of patient waiting.

She could picture the scene as it would be in the other room. The announcement, the consternation



and half-smothered outcry of dismay; then the gradual dying away of the mirth. There would be a little while of forced merriment and then the guests would go. And Philip and his father would be left amid the ruins of the feast and the bitterness of their disgrace.

She noticed suddenly that the women and maidens had stopped talking. A silence had fallen upon the feast-room, too. Elizabeth caught her breath. Someone must be telling Philip and his father now. Then gradually they would hear the boisterous gladness die down.

For a long second the strange hush lasted. And then everything was as it had been before. The talking, the laughter, the women running to and fro with their platters and pitchers. And high above the other voices rose the strong tones of the governor of the feast.

"How is this, Philip?" he was demanding. "Every man when he maketh a feast doth first serve the good wine and then when men have well drunk, he serveth that which is worse. But thou hast kept the *good* wine until now!"

Was he making cruel sport of Philip? But, no. The governor sounded well pleased. And then Philip replied, his voice still vibrant with pride and joy:

"But, governor, is the best not worth waiting for always?"

Then overwhelmingly rose the shouts: "To the



"THERE HATH BEEN A MIRACLE," SHE SAID . . . "THERE IS A  
MAN OF GOD IN THE HOUSE!"



bridegroom! Fill your cups to drink again to the bridegroom! Joy to Philip and his bride! ”

One of the maidens leaned cautiously toward the door of the feast-room.

“ They *have* wine! ” she announced. “ They are drinking it now. Terenth is silly and excitable. Alarming us for naught. Wait till she cometh again! We shall teach her a lesson. She was only . . . ”

But Terenth was already there. She had come in quietly, and so she stood near Elizabeth. The quick questions on everyone’s lips died before they had voice, for Terenth was changed as though a softening cloud had passed over her sharp features. Her usually shrill voice was low, and her eyes looked fixed and glassy.

“ There hath been a *miracle!* ” she said with slow emphasis, and her still voice seemed somehow to sound above the music and shouting beyond.

“ There is a man of God in this house! ”

Then, before the excited gasps of wonder had become coherent, Terenth went on, in that still, even, far away voice: “ *There was no wine.* Any of the women or the servants will tell you that. I did as Elizabeth bade me. I asked Mary of Nazareth to break the news to Philip and his father. I was just behind her as she entered the room. Instead of going to the end of the table she stopped beside her son. I heard her whisper to Him: ‘ They have no wine ’—only that. But she looked

at Him beseechingly. Her son looked grave for a moment and then He smiled a little and said in the gentlest voice: 'Woman, what have I to do with this? Mine hour is not yet come.' But she smiled back at Him and touched His shoulder—they must love each other deeply, those two—and signed to a servant. 'Do whatever He telleth thee,' she said.

"Then this Jesus told the servant to fill the six big water-jars in the hallway, full of water. It was Lemuel He told, and I helped him. When it was done He said quietly: 'Draw out now and bear to the governor of the feast!'"

"And as we drew," Terenth put her hand on her breast as though to keep down a choking breath,—*"the water changed to wine! They are drinking it now."*

"Terenth," called a voice quickly from the hall, "where art thou?"

And Terenth turned back to her duties.

The women's room seemed all at once like a field of grain through which the fire runs. But in the midst of it all, Elizabeth sat withdrawn, apart, trying to sense the awesome thing she had just heard.

Under this roof, Philip's roof, which was now her home, *water had been changed into wine!* That quiet guest in the other room had wrought a *miracle!* God was dwelling in this place. She trembled.

Then her fear of the unknown power lifted. The first instinctive terror at the nearness of an incred-

ible mystery left her. She felt only the gentle sympathy of this son of Mary whom she had met that day on the Nazareth road. It enfolded her as though His spirit had left the table of feasting to commune with hers. She seemed to feel His eyes upon her, revealing great riches of truth, illuminating her soul.

For, suddenly, as she looked back over the years that stretched behind her, she saw a light upon them. Water into wine? Why, that was but the eternal miracle of service and sacrifice! Pouring out from one's own cup to fill another's. Changing the flat, stale water of life into a glowing chalice of joy for thirsty lips. She herself had done that. She knew it now and was smitten with the wonder.

For little Sarah, for the boys, for her father and the blind grandmother, she had held out the overflowing cup which her unselfish love had sweetened.

And now, in her own great hour, to which her worn out heart and body seemed unable to rise, there had been poured out for her the very wine of God!

The voices of the women became audible to her at last.

"Elizabeth! How canst thou sit so quiet? Hast thou no *feeling*? *It is a miracle!* Who hath heard of such a thing since the days of the prophets! At thy wedding! *A miracle!* It will be remembered as long as Cana stands. And thou dost

sit there without speaking. Dost thou not *believe* it? ”

Then Elizabeth spoke. And they marvelled at her words and at the new tremulous note of joy in her voice.

“ Yea, I believe it. It hath been wrought *in me!* ” she answered.

For through her veins fresh life seemed to be coursing. It welled up within her, rich and strong. All the ardour of her young girlhood seemed to return to her. Before her stretched the years for which she and Philip had waited. A glory lay upon their un-lived days. Would always lie upon them. The glory of the Miracle. Water into wine at the divine touch of love!

She bowed her head in adoration. Some day she would look into the eyes of the Wedding Guest of Nazareth and tell Him she understood.

The merry-makers were beginning to leave. Gradually the feast-room emptied. Gay laughter floated back from the street. The women and maidens prepared to depart.

Elizabeth's heart beat fast. Joy of which she had never dreamed, possessed her. She felt the warm blood rise in her pale cheeks. For she knew now that when Philip's hand at last raised the betrothal veil; when his eyes looked for the first time upon the face of *his wife*, . . . that he would not be disappointed.



*VI*

*THE MOTHER OF GENNESARET*

*"One of his disciples . . . saith unto him,  
There is a lad here, which hath five barley loaves,  
and two small fishes: but what are they among so  
many?"—JOHN 6:8, 9.*

## VI

### THE MOTHER OF GENNESARET



THE late sunset lay upon the Sea of Galilee. Already the steep bluffs along the eastern shore had lost their reflected colour and loomed, grey and bare, except where sharp, storm-cut gullies showed like black scars.

The last, golden rays of the day streamed across the sky to touch the immaculate, high-lifted snows of Mount Hermon in the north, and then settled softly upon the rounding, western hills behind the plain of Gennesaret. Within the enfolding of the warm, waning light, the towns of Bethsaida and Capernaum nestled like a pair of tired sea-gulls along the beach.

The sea was still. The clear, shining waters smiled back at the lighted hills; the fishing boats and the white-sailed shallops floated as though in a mirage; far down the lake, a showy barge from the city of Herod gave the only spot of colour. Peace had fallen gently, along with the first shadows of the evening.

But in the heart of the woman who walked hur-

riedly past Bethsaida and Capernaum to the quiet vantage point where a jutting rock commanded the long view of the sea, there was no peace. For Miriam, wife of Jonas, the fisherman, was hopeless to the point of despair.

She was still a young woman, but her slender shoulders were bent as though from much lifting of heavy burdens, and the smooth hair that framed her thin face was streaked with gray, where once it had been black and glossy as the wing of a bird. Something of youth imperishable still occasionally shone in her dark eyes,—a quick, luminous flare as of a lamp suddenly lighted.

It was this bright upleaping in her eyes that had caused Jonas, the stolid fisherman, to set down his basket of fish, long ago, beside her gateway in Capernaum, and wait until he had seen it again. It was the flame he suddenly desired to lighten the gloom of his poor hut on the edge of the sea.

Miriam threw herself down upon the rock. There was the weariness of physical exhaustion in the gesture of her body. In her face there was the greater weariness of her soul's discontent.

With a sad dispassionateness she was weighing the years of her life in the balance, and she began with the old days in Capernaum.

She and Lois had dwelt there from their orphaned childhood, with their mother's sister, Hannah, in the small stone house on the edge of the town. There had been peace and beauty there.

Even as children they had sensed it. The tiny open court with its vine-covered walls; the garden, green with oleanders, and bright with flowers in their season; the clean, uncrowded rooms with shining brass lamps, and chairs of polished wood.

And then, everywhere about the walls, the adornments which Hannah's own fingers had wrought: the tapestries which rich men and women came to buy; the sale of which kept the little home in modest comfort.

As soon as they were old enough to sit before the large tapestry frames, Hannah had begun upon the education of the small maidens committed to her care. Very patiently, as a teacher who loves her subject, she guided the uncertain, awkward little fingers over simple patterns; she pointed out the beauty of the design; she blent soft colours under their gaze.

Perhaps it was due to the gentle enthusiasm of their teacher, perhaps to an inborn artistic sense, but slowly and surely the girls gained a fine ease with their needles. As time passed they began to try intricate patterns of their own, new blendings, fine, exquisite stitches.

Hannah was radiant. They would work together now. Her eyes, long overstrained, would have some rest. Her thin fingers which sometimes trembled as she sorted the threads, might now lie occasionally idle in her lap.

Happy, busy years followed. Lois and Miriam

loved their work. It was pleasant to sit in the cool court with their sewing-frames before them and create beautiful things in purple and white, or rose and gold, while Hannah read to them from an old parchment of the Scriptures, or told them stories of Jerusalem where she had learned the art of needlework, long ago.

“ They laugh at us Galilæans, those people of the South,” she would say. “ They call us barbarians. But never have I seen in Jerusalem, not even in the holy Temple itself, tapestries more beautiful than those my own hands have fashioned. And you, my children, will make others still more fair, for you will weave, along with the silken threads, the dreams of your youth. Age has no such bright magic! Only patient skill that has grown weary. Weave your light hearts into your patterns, my children! ”

There was always a pleasant excitement when patrons knocked at the door, and Hannah ushered them courteously inside to see the glowing strips that hung for their inspection. Perhaps it was the nobleman who lived in the great house on the hill. He always bought when he came, and admired the pattern. If Lois and Miriam had shared in the work they were allowed to come in to hear his praise with meek delight.

Sometimes Hannah came back, breathless and beaming, to the court to report that a rich buyer from Tiberias had just given an order which would

mean a sum large enough that the girls might have new dresses, and still leave something to apply against the debt that they knew with a vague incuriosity hung over the house. There were always small, happy surprises to brighten the quiet, comfortable days.

It had been one morning in spring that Miriam, sitting alone in the court, singing as she matched her threads, had looked up to see a young man standing in the gateway. He was tall and strong with a face reddened and roughened from the wind. He wore a fisherman's cloak of coarse homespun and he carried the large reed basket that fish-peddlers bore.

Miriam's bright gaze rested upon him as she shook her head. "We do not wish to buy," she said.

The young man continued to gaze at her, not rudely but with an intense interest. Then he set his basket down and leaned awkwardly against the wall.

"I am Jonas of Bethsaida," he said slowly. "What is thy name?"

"Miriam," the girl answered a little proudly. "We make fine tapestries for sale."

Jonas was silent for a little while. Then, as he raised his basket, he said, "I have a house of my own down by the sea. And soon I shall buy a boat and catch only large fish." And then he had gone away.



Miriam's cheeks had burned, even while she laughed to herself. There was no mistaking the look in his eyes. A common fisherman! And he had looked in that way at her! She would tell Hannah and Lois when they came back from market and they would all laugh together.

But, somehow, when they returned she had said nothing.

After that, Jonas came every week to stand in the gateway, but always when he saw she was alone. Once he came over to look at the tapestry upon which her slender fingers were working. He made no comment upon its beauty. Only, at last, as he turned to go, he said slowly: "I fear thou wouldst find my house too small and dark for thee."

Miriam pondered the speech that night while Lois slept soundly beside her. Strange, little, trembling fires sprang up in her heart. Life stretched before her like a far, unknown country wherein one might walk in many paths. Some would open, no doubt, into fair enchanted valleys, and others lead to dark, stony mountains that would shut one in like dungeon bars. One must be very careful in choosing.

Meanwhile a new skill with her needle seemed to come to Miriam. Perhaps it was because her mind had suddenly awakened from its childhood sleep into the sweet, startled questionings of maidenhood. But, in any case, Miriam's fingers

began to be moved by the creative power of the artist.

Old Hannah watched with eager pride. The change was subtle, but it was there. A little more vividness of outline, a daring dash of colour, a new but inevitable shading—and Miriam's tapestries took on life.

And with her growing power there came, too, with a rush of deep wonder, her knowledge of it and joy in it. She began to study the sunsets, to watch people and animals, to see flowers and trees with new eyes. For now nothing but perfection would satisfy.

Lois laughed at her earnestness and envied a little, too. After all, though, her own finished work looked well enough. Why take such foolish pains!

And so life had gone its busy, happy way until Miriam was sixteen. Then the stroke fell. Old Hannah, whose fingers had been trembling more than usual of late, did not answer one morning when they called her. The girls found her quite still. The mysterious door which men called Death, must have closed upon her suddenly in the night-time, shutting her away from all the bright gladness of life!

Like a heavy dream of pain the next hours passed. Wailing women filled the house. Miriam shrank from them. All that remained of the kind-hearted, beauty-loving little woman who had

formed the centre of their lives was at last carried to the tombs on the hillside.

When the sisters returned to the empty house, a man awaited them. It was Philus, the rich merchant. He stated his business with cruel brevity. He owned the house, now. Hannah had borrowed money from him years ago. He must take the property and its furnishings to pay the remainder of the debt. He was obdurate, for he knew the helplessness of his victims.

When he had gone Lois flashed upon her sister a look so eagerly resolute that it was almost joy.

"I know what we shall do!" she cried. "Have I not dreamed of it? Longed for it? There is a city where beauty abounds like the sunlight; where there is luxury and romance! where there is a palace and a castle that seem to touch the sky; where soldiers in shining uniforms keep marching through the streets; where courtiers in magnificent silks go out upon the sea in barges trimmed with gold! Where . . ."

Miriam's face was white with amazement.

"*Tiberias!*" she gasped. "The city of Herod! Thou canst not mean the *city of sin!*"

Lois went on undaunted.

"I know all thou wouldst say," she replied. "Have we not been taught that no Jew enters that city undefiled? But it calls me! I will see its beauty, if I die for it! Hearken! Dost thou remember, months ago, when the Tiberian woman

whose name was Annis, bought the piece of rose and gold? I overheard her from the hallway. She told Hannah she was herself a needleworker. She had heard of us. She came to ask if Hannah would allow one of us to go to be her helper. Ever since I have kept it close in my heart. I should still have gone if Hannah had lived. But now! What have we here? What can we do, alone and homeless? The sight of Capernaum sickens me. It reeks of fish and ugliness. I want to see the Towers of Herod against the sunset! I want to embroider garments for courtiers and princesses! I want to be a part of all that rich beauty and movement and excitement . . . I want . . .”

She stopped in triumph, for her sister's eyes were shining with a light that dazzled her.

“Yes, *yes*,” Miriam cried. “I, too, can see it! I can feel myself there, with the wonder of it all about me! I can feel myself making such patterns that Herod himself would marvel and say, ‘Who hath wrought this?’ We might become rich . . .” She stopped. The light went out of her eyes. She clutched her sister in horror.

“I am *mad* to speak so. Thou art beside thyself to urge it. We would stain our souls to enter those wicked gates. It must never be spoken of again!”

Lois flung her head. There was strength in her tone, as she spoke.

“We are homeless. We have no close friends to

whom we may turn for help. My mind is made up. I shall go to Tiberias. It is the golden dream of my heart. I shall seek the woman who made the offer to Hannah."

Suddenly they clung to each other, each wildly beseeching, each unmoved in her own resolve.

"But what wilt thou do, if thou comest not with me?" Lois cried wildly.

A vision of Jonas in the gateway rose before Miriam's racked brain.

"I can marry," she half whispered.

When Lois understood she began again with new arguments that seemed invincible. A common fisherman! A dark hut by the seaside! She had seen them. She knew their poverty. It was unthinkable for Miriam.

Through the long night they wept, arms intertwined, each pleading desperately, as she saw it, for the very life of the other. When morning brought the sleep of exhaustion there had been no victory. Lois, fixed and fearless, exalted with a fervid, reckless hope, would go to seek her fortune in Tiberias; Miriam, agonized between the same longing and the clear call of her faith, would remain behind, would become a fisherman's wife, if need be.

On the second morning, after a long embrace, Lois took the path that led south over the Plain of Gennesaret to the City of Herod.

"If I find it as beautiful as my dreams, I shall

never come back. By that, thou shalt know," she said.

Jonas came to the court that afternoon, as he did each week. There were only a few broken words spoken. But at sundown Miriam walked beside him up the beach to Bethsaida, her bundle of possessions in his empty fish-basket, her precious tapestry frames under her arm. She was to be his wife.

The house which he owned stood outside the green circle of village verdure. It was rudely built and had but two small rooms, each lighted only by a narrow window. The battered clay lamp with its rag wick, the mill at the doorway, a table and pallet and stool,—these were the furnishings. The bare sands stretched down to the sea. Opposite rose the grey, eastern bluffs.

But, at sixteen, every sunrise brings a song. Miriam's desolate distress lifted as she bent all her energies toward adapting herself to her new life. She rendered the little home spotless; she disposed about the few good articles she had brought with her. She listened sympathetically to the great ambition of Jonas, toward which he was feverishly saving every penny; the buying of a boat of his own.

Every day when she had done all she could to help him, she sat down before the frames and wrought at the old beloved task and thought of Hannah and Lois, and the great Power that had so



separated them. Hope usually took the place of sadness. Jonas was kind, though he did expect her to do her full share of the work. The years might somehow yet bring joy.

But they had brought hardship instead. They had fallen upon her bright soul like a crushing avalanche. Her slender strength did not prove equal to the burdens: the water to be carried a long distance, the heavy clothes to be washed in the sea, the bags of barley to be lifted, to be ground, and made into endless loaves, the fish to be cleaned for market—and more and more fish!

Then in the close, sultry summer days, when the hills shut away all the air—days when there was now no cool and shaded court in which to sit, there came the dreaded fever and ague.

As time passed, intolerable pain came again and again to rack her, and to haunt her with its memory or its fear. And the dull burden of every day grew heavier. There was no time now to work at the tapestry frames, and besides, the delicate fingers that had once blended the threads were now so rough and stiffened that they could not safely touch the soft strands.

Before Jonas could buy his boat there were new, hungry little mouths to be fed, and so he compromised upon a rented one, the money for which ate relentlessly into his small earnings. Grim, biting poverty came to make his permanent abode with them.



The children were sound and strong. Jonas looked upon them with pride. Miriam loved them, but with a weary, passive affection. She ministered all day to their needs; she followed the grinding round of each day's toil without complaint. But at sunset, when sometimes a sail, far down the sea, flashed a pale glory against the sky, she gazed toward Tiberias with a strange, set look upon her face. Lois had never come back. It had all been as beautiful, then, as they had dreamed!

As soon as little Mark, the eldest child, was old enough, Jonas took him with him in the boat. And when he was twelve years old he was allowed to make the trip alone to Capernaum with the baskets of fish.

One evening he came back running along the beach. He was breathless when he reached the doorway. He started impetuously upon his story. There was a man visiting in Capernaum at Simon Peter's house,—a rabbi. He was a friend of Simon's and His name was Jesus and everybody was going to hear Him teach.

"I could hardly sell my fish," the boy rushed on. "Nobody was at home. And then all at once I saw the crowd before Simon's house. They were standing away out in the street. I tried to get in but no one else could get near the door. *And just then,*" the boy's shrill voice rose impressively, "I saw four men carrying a pallet. They went close by me and I could see the sick man on the bed.

He could not walk. He had the palsy. And they tried to get in to the rabbi, but the people were so crowded they could not move them, so the bearers went up on the outside stairs to the roof and lifted some tiles and let the sick man right down. And in a few minutes he came out, *walking!* The rabbi had healed him! And he was saying, 'Glory to God! Glory to God!' over and over!" The boy paused again, breathless, his eyes shining.

"Come and eat thy supper, Mark," Miriam said wearily. It had been a hard day.

Jonas was faintly curious. "I have heard some of the men talk about this rabbi. What did He look like?" he asked.

"I do not know," Mark said regretfully. "I could not see him."

Some time later, he had another strange story to tell.

"Dost thou know the nobleman who lives in the great house on the hill above Capernaum?" he asked his mother eagerly.

How well Miriam remembered the days when he came to Hannah's door!

"Yes," she answered quickly. "What hast thou heard of him?"

Mark spoke earnestly. The nobleman's son had been very sick. He was dying. The nobleman had gone to Cana to ask the rabbi to come and heal him. And the rabbi had but spoken a word and told the nobleman to go back home and his son

would be well. And truly he was! The servants had gone out to meet their master with the news and everybody in Capernaum was talking about it.

Mark's face grew wistful. "I should like to see the rabbi," he said.

But it was another happening more strange and full of portent to Miriam than either of these, that had driven her out from her home on this spring evening to seek refuge where she might face a great temptation and meet a sharp struggle alone.

Yesterday, for the first time since her departure to Tiberias, she had received a message from Lois. As a voice from the dead it had come. A youth travelling north had brought it. Lois had sent word many times before, but the messenger had always failed to find her. Lois feared her sister dead, but sent tidings once more. She was well and happy and prosperous. She had not married and still worked with Annis. The prices paid for tapestries in Tiberias were marvellous. They received large orders yearly from the court. She begged Miriam to leave everything to come, even now, and work with her. She had longed for her all these years. And it was not yet too late!

So in the waning sunset Miriam reviewed her life slowly and bitterly and trembled under the desire that tore at her heart in this crisis. To be free from the drudgery that was wearing out her body, and crushing her spirit; to have a chance to use again the great gift that was hers! A few

weeks' care of her poor rough hands, a few weeks' practice again with the needle, and she *knew*, with the old sense of power surging back within her, that she could do finer work than either Lois or Annis, for she *could* make her patterns *live*.

And then to know comfort again: a dress of soft linen instead of this coarse, unlovely homespun; food, nourishing and palatable, instead of the barley bread and fish that made up their only fare! Rest, refreshment, bright rooms, cool courts, strength once again, laughter—life! Her very soul cried out for it.

But to desert Jonas and the children! She shuddered at the blackness of the thought.

And yet her mind presented the temptation in a new and logical form. If she had died last summer with the fever, as they all thought she would; if she should die *this* summer, would it not be the same? Had not Jehovah smitten the wife of Jabez who lived just up the beach, and whose children were small and sickly?

Nay, had He not taken her own parents and then taken away Hannah, and left her and Lois alone? Why should she not take her own life into her own keeping? Why must she be bound here, forever, as to a millstone?

So she wrestled while the shadows lengthened. Over and over again she forced herself to see the thing she contemplated in all its cruel selfishness and its defilement of the faith to which she had

been born. But only to have sweep over her once more the waves of hot rebellion, the deep hatred of her lot, the passionate craving for freedom and comfort and beauty which urged her on.

It was time to go back, and still her mind seethed in indecision. Tomorrow she could perhaps think more clearly. She dragged her weary feet back along the shore.

The next morning Miriam opened her heavy eyes curiously upon the new day. Would something rise from the dead level of its untried hours to lift this pain of suspense? To persuade, reassure her, set her free? Ah, something *must*!

Jonas left early for the boat. Mark was to make a quick trip to Capernaum with a small basket of fish. Miriam watched them go. The other children swarmed about, playing, quarrelling, shouting.

Miriam began mechanically to put her house in order. If she *should* leave. . . . She swept and scrubbed, and baked fresh barley loaves, many more than usual. She worked hard, drugging the questionings of her mind with action, postponing the final decision even as she made her vague preparations.

Just at noon Mark came running in, and tossed down his empty basket.

"Mother," he cried, his dark eyes burning with excitement, "the rabbi I told thee of—the one that healed the palsied man and the nobleman's son—is

over there, across the sea on the mountain and everyone from Capernaum and Bethsaida is going over to see Him and hear Him teach! Mother, wilt thou let me go? I *must* see Him! ” His voice broke with eagerness.

“Thou must first eat,” said Miriam.

“But I am not hungry. Mother, I dare not wait! I must overtake the crowds now. If I tarry I may miss Him! ”

“Still, thou must eat,” Miriam returned firmly. “Here,” catching up a handful of the barley cakes she had just baked, and two of the small fish on the table, “take these with thee. Thou canst eat them on the way. And be not later than sundown in thy returning.”

She put the food in a small, lidless basket that lay near her hand. The boy grasped it and sped like an arrow across the sands.

The afternoon hours passed. Miriam washed clothes at the edge of the sea,—still strainingly busy, still preparing, still warding off the last surrender.

Jonas came in for a hasty supper and hurried back again for a late night’s fishing. Miriam watched the slanting sun. Mark should be home. Why had she allowed him to go at all? Something might have befallen him. An unusual restlessness took possession of her. She bore it until the sun lay red upon the top of the hill, then she, too, hurried along the sands to where the boats for crossing



lay. Jonas knew one of the owners and had often served him. She was sure of his help.

In a few minutes they had reached the eastern bank.

"The crowds went on up that way," the boatman told her, indicating the steep hill. "Never have I seen so many people together! Thousands, there seemed to be!"

Miriam took the path he pointed out. It led to the opening at the upper end of the hills. Her heart beat quickly. Now that she was nearing the spot where the boy must be, fear for his safety gave way to a strange curiosity and anticipation.

At last she had reached the crest of the final low hill and started to go down. As her eye swept the wide, grassy hollow below, she stopped with an involuntary cry. The scene before her was so close, so real with a grand and vivid beauty, and yet so far from anything her artist's brain could have imagined.

There on the broad, green slopes, their brightly-coloured turbans showing like a mass of blooming flowers, was seated a multitude; a great, dense, ingathering of living souls, which might so easily have been a confused, clamorous throng, but which instead sat motionless, listening, intent upon the figure of the man who stood before them. The sunset light streamed across the narrow sea and rested upon His face, as He spoke.

Miriam, creeping closer, watched it with the eyes



of a creator who sees the chiseling of the soul. Suffering was there, and longing; and the lonely sorrow that does not speak. Ah, Miriam could recognize those lines. There was love and sympathy in the tender mouth; there was infinite strength in the high forehead as if of a will that knew the royal power of overcoming.

But stronger than all, there shone upon the features a light that the sunset did not bring. It was the light of a rare and holy joy, of the peace that passes understanding.

He stopped speaking. Several men came close to Him as if to confer. Miriam could not hear their words. Suddenly one of them turned and pointed behind him. It was then that she saw Mark. He sat in the front row of people, his slender young body leaning forward, his dark eyes fixed on the rabbi's face. In one hand he absently clutched the open basket. Miriam could see that the food she had placed there was still in it. The eager, foolish child! He had taken no time to eat.

But all at once Miriam's eyes grew large with wonder. The young men who seemed to be the rabbi's disciples, were going about among the people, separating them into groups, making paths among them. It was all done with a singular quiet and order.

Then when all was finished one of the men went up to Mark and, after a word, took the basket from the boy's willing hands, and turning, gave it to the

rabbi. The disciples fell back to the sides. The rabbi stood alone with the little basket extended in His hands, His eyes raised to heaven. Before Him in utter stillness sat the watching multitude.

Miriam put her hands wildly to her head. Was she mad? Was she dreaming? The coarse loaves her own hands had baked that morning; the wretched little fish her own fingers had prepared, —now, the centre of this scene, held up in blessing by this strange, God-like man, watched by the waiting thousands with expectancy, and by the disciples, *and Mark*, with eyes of shining faith?

The hush deepened. Not a breath, nor a movement! The rabbi gazed steadfastly toward heaven, then beckoned to the men who stood near. They came, bringing their large, empty traveller's baskets, and waited beside Him.

There was a sudden straining forward on the part of the multitude, a sharp sound as of the quick intaking of many breaths. For out of Mark's tiny basket, held directly in their view, *the rabbi was filling the others!* Heaping them with the loaves and the fishes!

Unquestioningly, apparently without surprise, the disciples passed them to the waiting people and returned to the rabbi. Their baskets were refilled again and again. The hungry thousands were fed.

Miriam was upon her knees, trembling. This common air she breathed must be athrill with God. This man, this rabbi, had taken her poor food from

the hands of her own little lad, and with it *had wrought a miracle!* Here, under the evening sky, her own eyes had witnessed it! It was as if God had reached down from His heavenly place to touch her humble hand!

At last she raised her head. The rabbi was watching her, with clear, searching eyes. They read her heart and then seemed waiting for her answer. With a cry she stretched forth her hands. She had forgotten the multitude. To her there were but herself and the Master upon the hillside with the celestial throbbing of the air about them.

"Master," she whispered, "Thou hast opened mine eyes! I will be faithful!"

He smiled and turned to look upon Mark, who still sat rapt, his eyes upraised to the Master's face in worship. Miriam watched him, too, as if for the first time. Her little lad! And she had never seen the beauty of his soul.

There was a stir among the thousands. Miriam turned and ran quickly back over the path by which she had come.

It was dark when she reached home and the children were frightened and crying. They clung to her. How suddenly sweet was the realization that these little bodies were of more value to her than all the gold of Herod's palace.

Mark came and she heard his tale of wonder. She listened lovingly and the child, warmed by her new interest, showed her the adoration in his heart.

At last they were all asleep. Miriam walked out upon the pebbled sands and looked far down the sea.

Tiberias? The old temptation was broken. It could never meet her again. Against the living mystery on yonder hillside, the glories of Herod's city must be tawdry and dead.

Freedom? Never had she felt so free, with a sudden kinship for the wide spaces of the sea and sky and mountains. But greater still, there was the freedom of a mind lifted up into high reaches of vision; of a soul drawn upward to meet the reality of God.

Tapestries? Oh, blind, blind that she had been. To her had been given tapestries of tender flesh and blood upon which to embroider the fair patterns of the soul.

She raised her head in the darkness. The old glad light had returned again to her eyes. For she knew now that the common daily elements which her heart had so despised, had been transfigured. She knew that through each day's patient, wearing toil, she would see again the Master's face.



*VII*

*THE WIFE OF PONTIUS PILATE*

*“When he was set down on the judgment seat, his wife sent unto him, saying, Have thou nothing to do with that just man: for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him.”*

—MATTHEW 27: 19.



## VII

### THE WIFE OF PONTIUS PILATE



HE blue robe, my lady? ”

“ Oh, yes, the blue.”

The woman at the dressing-table leaned back listlessly in her chair. This was the most intolerable time of her exile. Winters in

Cæsarea were endurable, but the spring months in Jerusalem! They had in them all the hurt of a familiar sweetness in a strange setting.

Each morning as she half woke in the early dawn she caught the breath of perfume from the warm budding gardens, she felt the bright sunshine; she heard the soft twitterings of the birds; her drowsy eyes glimpsed the delicate lacy mist of the new green leaves through the window. Still half in dreams her heart stirred with an old delight. Then, with full consciousness, the glad feeling died. She was not in Rome nor yet in Capri. She was in Jerusalem. And she was homesick.

The maid returned with the blue robe over her arm.

Procla arose and allowed it to be fastened about her.

"There is one curl still too high, Livia," she said as she considered herself in the mirror.

The maid rearranged it carefully.

"And will that be all, my lady?"

"I think so. Leave word for my lord Pilate that I shall await him in my sitting-room."

When she was alone Procla walked slowly over to the window. Below stretched the formal gardens ending in the grove. The gardeners were still busy at the long flower-beds and a group of workmen were finishing a rustic bridge over the narrow artificial river that ran through the palace grounds. Swans moved, white and stately, in the sunny pools, and long winding walks shaded by flowering trees stretched away on every side. Around it all rose the great park walls with their bristling turrets.

Procla smiled to herself. As far as magnificence went, inside and out, the palace which was her home for a few months each spring was a worthy match for any in Rome. Herod had meant it to be when he built it. Probably no other Procurator in the Empire had more luxurious establishments than Pilate, both here and at Cæsarea. But . . . Her smile faded. He deserved that much at least. For no one had a harder province to rule!

As for herself, the thrill of the first years as governor's wife had passed. The luxury and prestige of the position did not pay for the loneliness and the worry. She wished they were back again

at the capital, with Pontius a plain Knight. Or better still, that they were living quietly at Capri with her father in the villa that overlooked the sea.

Dear Capri! That was the root of all her longings in the spring. She wanted to turn in a moment from the fresh green verdure of the villa gardens to the long shining blue of the water. She wanted to watch the sunset behind the cliffs and wait for the moon-rise over the bay. She wanted to feast her eyes again on the bright-coloured roofs of the peasant houses that sloped like a variegated stairway down the hill to the town. She wanted to run out in the dewy morning to gather with her own hands the flowers for the table and listen to the doves calling from the lindens like softly muted flageolets. She was so weary of the pomp of palaces!

She turned from the window and walked to the sitting-room that joined her bed-chamber. She sank down in a low chair, toying aimlessly with her rings. Pontius was late again. She hoped there was no more trouble.

Her thoughts drifted back to the old villa at Capri. It was there she had first met Pontius. He had come one summer to spend a few weeks with a fellow-soldier who lived near them. She was eighteen then, and he was thirty. It was love from the first on his part. And finally her own heart had surrendered.

One night they had walked down the long colon-

nade in the moonlight, and he spoke to her of himself.

"I'm not the sort of man your father is, Procla. He's a student, a philosopher. He has a fineness that I will always lack. I've been a soldier and a politician almost since my first toga. It has hardened me to many things. Your father thinks the Gladiatorial games, for instance, are sheer butchery. He couldn't look at them. Now, I think they're good sport. I can watch them and go home and enjoy my dinner. And as a politician I can't live up to all your father's standards of life. I can't do it and make progress in my career. He hasn't mixed with the politics of the capital or he would understand."

He hesitated, then spoke again very low.

"There is one thing I want to make plain to you. I have killed men in my time both from necessity and from expediency, and I may do it again. But I've never wronged a woman. And in the years to come, if you will marry me, whatever my sins may be—and I suppose they will be enough—they will never be sins against you. Do you understand me? "

And Procla had understood. She had looked up into the tense dark face above her and whispered,

"Heaven help me, I'm afraid I love you! "

They had been married that fall and gone back to Rome for the winter. The next spring the Em-

peror had recalled Valerius Gratus from the procuratorship of Judæa in Palestine, and by skilful statecraft Pontius Pilate had succeeded in winning the appointment. That was seven years ago. Except for one visit home, they had been here ever since. Seven long, troublous years!

There was the sudden opening and closing of a door, and a heavy footfall in the room beyond; then Pilate came quickly toward her. She rose, smiling. There was always between them this little ceremonious pleasure of meeting. No matter what Judæan controversy was vexing Pilate's mind at the moment, Procla knew that his whole heart was hers as he kissed her.

"Did you have a hard day?" she asked, as they went on down by the outside stairway to supper in the informal dining-hall.

"Not easy. I've been out at the aqueduct. It will soon be too hot for the men to work at mid-day, so I'm keeping them hard at it while I can. I rode the whole length of it, inspecting. It's going to be a magnificent piece of work and just what Jerusalem needs more than anything else. They'll have plenty of pure water for the first time in a century. But do I get any thanks from the people for what I've done? I do not. They're still hounding me about using the temple money for it! Isn't it doing more good in the aqueduct than going into the pockets of those fat old priests?"

Procla pressed his arm.

"Poor Pontius! But they'll feel differently when the thing is all done."

"I doubt it. They're utterly unreasonable. When anything touches their religion they turn into a pack of wolves. The Rabbis and the priests are still convinced that the Tower of Siloam fell because of the wrath of their Yaweh god at the use I was making of the *Corban* money. Can they expect twenty-five miles of heavy masonry to be built without a few accidents? If we don't kill any more than those eighteen men the tower fell upon, we'll be doing well."

"It was sad about them," Procla said softly.

"Well, I admit it was sad. But I don't regret my aqueduct on that account. The thing I can't understand about these Jews is their utter lack of logic. According to them I am the sole offender in this business. Yet when eighteen innocent men are killed, Yaweh is supposed to be punishing my crime. A strange god, that! Whatever we may think of Jove, at least he shot his thunderbolts *straight*."

"Ah, Jove," Procla said and sighed. Then she began to talk brightly about the gardens.

When the meal was ended, they went out on the sheltered portico. The servants brought the lighted braziers. Pilate dismissed them with a gesture, then leaned back comfortably in his chair, and looked admiringly at Procla who sat opposite.

"A good digestion, a good conscience and a good

wife! What more can the gods give a man? ” he remarked.

“ Are you so sure you possess them all? ” Procla asked, smiling.

Pilate laughed. “ Oh, I merely put the conscience in to make a trilogy. I never expect to possess one, good or bad. What book is that you have? ”

“ Horace. Shall I read aloud? It’s the kind of poetry you like. Listen to this: it’s the Secular Hymn:

*Phæbus! and Dian! thou whose sway,  
Mountains and woods obey!  
Twin glories of the skies forever worshipped,  
hear!  
Accept our prayer this sacred year  
When, as the Sibyl’s voice ordained  
For ages yet to come,  
Pure maids and youths unstained  
Invoke the gods who love the sevenfold hills  
of Rome.*

Procla’s voice rang out clear and sweet until the last lines. Then it faltered a little.

*Return we home! We know that Jove  
And all the gods our song approve  
To Phæbus and Diana given;  
The virgin hymn is heard in Heaven.*

There was a brief pause and then Procla said



wistfully: "I shouldn't have read that, for I've been feeling a little homesick all week. Not so much for Rome as for Capri. And not even so much for Capri as for—something else."

Pilate leaned forward, his black eyes fixed upon his wife.

"Procla," he said slowly, "are you unhappy *with me?* "

For answer she rose and crossed the space between them, then seated herself on the broad arm of his chair.

"You are so foolish, Pontius! But I love you the more for it." There was a long silence and then Procla said slowly, "The thing which troubles me is that I've lost my faith." Her voice dropped lower. "I've lost my gods and I cannot get them back."

Pilate drew a deep breath.

"Is *that* all?" he said tenderly.

"But you must not treat it as a light thing, Pontius. For me it's a tragedy. It has taken something vital out of my life. Something deep and joyous and permanent. Is it not terrible, ghastly, that I haven't a single god to whom I can pray? Women need prayer, Pontius. Men may be different, but—" She broke off and then cried vehemently:

"Oh, I wish I could believe just as I did when I was a child, as my mother died believing! If I could only be sure again that Jove was ruling the

world from the top of Mount Olympus! That Phœbus was racing across the heavens in his chariot of fire and Diana was guarding the night! And Pan! Dear Pan, with his sweet piping and his timely aid. If they had even left me Pan! He was the last to die."

Pilate drew her close to him.

"The whole trouble is you are too much alone. You miss your own people. I'm sorry, Procla." Then he hurried on.

"But if you want to believe in the old gods, why don't you? Thousands of people still do—as much as they ever did."

Procla shook her head sadly.

"You can't, Pontius. Surely you know that yourself. After your mind has suddenly opened to the fact that the top of Olympus is the same as any other mountain, you can't reinstate the gods there. And then little by little you see it all for what it really is: a beautiful fabric built up by men themselves to satisfy a hunger and explain a mystery. You can only believe in it while it's kept in a shadowy background. Once bring it out honestly into the sunlight, and it's gone. Dead."

She sat silent a moment then her lips curved tenderly.

"Now to Mother it was all so real. She believed everything. Even to Daphne's turning into a laurel tree and Narcissus into a flower! I think she fully

expected some day to meet a god face to face. And she would have been worthy! ”

She stared off into the darkness of the garden.

“ Father never talked much about it, but I know he felt there was only one Great Spirit. So many of the philosophers have believed that. Euripides has a verse that always haunts me:

*No grudge hath He at the greatest;  
No scorn of mean estate.  
But to all who liveth His wine He giveth,  
Griefless, immaculate.*

“ That was not Jove he was speaking of. It was another. But somehow I can't find Him. Don't you ever wonder about it, Pontius? ”

Pilate moved uneasily in his chair.

“ Everybody wonders sometimes. But I don't spend much time on it. I've too many worries every day that I have to think of. The Stoics to me have the best idea of them all. They have a real man's religion. But for a woman it seems a little hard.”

“ Oh, for everyone, Pontius. Hard and cold. It leaves one uplifted for a moment and then sadder than ever.”

Pilate patted her hand gently.

“ The whole trouble, as I said, is that you haven't enough here to interest you. You brood too much. What about taking the air a little oftener through the city? You are safe if you

keep one of the servants near you. You might find it diverting. Why, you might even see this new young Rabbi perform a miracle! Jesus, I think his name is. That would thrill you."

Procla suddenly burst into a ringing little laugh.

"Oh, that reminds me. I have something to tell you that will amuse you very much. Tirzah, the Hebrew needlewoman, told me yesterday when she came to alter one of my robes. I mentioned Herod and she said that some time ago the Phari-sees went to this Jesus where he was teaching and warned him that he had better stop or Herod might kill him. And what do you suppose he answered them? *Imagine, Pontius!* Openly in a crowd!"

"I couldn't guess," said Pilate.

"Indeed you couldn't. He said, 'Go ye and tell *that fox* that I shall continue to teach and work my cures today and tomorrow and the next day, until my work is perfected.'"

Pilate's eyes were incredulous.

"Do you suppose he really said it?"

"But he did! Tirzah heard him herself. She said it was repeated all over the country."

"Jove! The man has courage!" Then Pilate laughed to himself. "'*That fox*'! Now, there's the perfect name for Herod. And curiously enough it's the one epithet I hadn't thought of applying to him. 'That fox'! You knew he was still angry with me?"

"I surmised it," Procla answered.

"Ridiculous! Just because I had a few of his precious Galilæans killed in that last outbreak at the temple. A good piece of work, too, for things have been quieter ever since."

"Don't," Procla said, drawing back a little. "It hurts me to have you seem so cruel."

"But I'm not cruel, dear," the man defended himself. "You can't be governor of Jerusalem and allow rioting in the streets. I had to teach those Jews a lesson. I've given way enough to them already. They've crowded me twice into a corner where for policy's sake I had to submit to their will. By Hercules! I hope they may never do it again! "

He stood up stretching his strong muscular arms above his head.

"Oh, Procla, I'm weary of politics and intrigues and religions! I'm sick of everything in my life except you. Let us go indoors and play a game of draughts."

But by the next evening, when Pilate met his wife in their private garden, she knew by the look on his face that some new network of anxiety had enmeshed him.

"What is it? More trouble?" she asked at once.

"Enough," Pilate answered. "I thought we would get over this Passover time without any outbreak. But it suddenly looks today as though the biggest riot of them all were brewing."

Procla's face paled a little.

"But what— What can possibly be left for it to be?"

Pilate tried to speak casually. "Oh, it really may all blow over. I didn't mean to startle you. I knew you would be interested, though, for we were talking about the man only last night. It's this new prophet Jesus that they're stirring up the trouble about."

"But he isn't connected with politics!"

"That's just the point. I don't know. I've heard rumours of his teaching and his cures for two years but I never thought seriously about it. Now I discover today that he has a tremendous following which with him as a leader might overthrow the priesthood and perhaps establish him as king. The whole hierarchical party is frantic at the prospect. At all events, if he is allowed to head an uprising at Passover time it will mean civil war, and I simply cannot permit that. Not in the Emperor's present mood. It would cost me my position, my whole career! You know Tiberius!"

Procla spoke reassuringly.

"I'm sure you are making too much of this, Pontius. All I have heard of this man has been of the most gentle nature. His interests are purely religious, I am confident."

"But you can't be sure in this country, Procla. You can with a Roman. But with a Jew you can't

tell where his religion stops and his politics begin. That's been the source of all my trouble in Judæa. Think of the career of Judas the Galilæan! It makes no difference whether you call him a religious fanatic or a revolutionist. The harm he did was all the same."

Pilate was thoughtful for a moment. Then he went on.

"What I have to do at once is to inform myself about this man. And I don't know where to turn for a trustworthy spy. All the Jews are prejudiced one way or another, and any of my guard is likely to bring back a garbled account."

"Pontius! "

Pilate looked up in surprise at the urgency of her tone. Her eyes were shining.

"Pontius, let me be the spy! I'll go veiled and no one will know me. I'll take Livia with me. We'll go wherever the man is teaching and listen. Oh, Pontius, please let me! It will give me something to do, to think about. And then I should be really helping you! "

The man smiled at her earnestness.

"I don't see any reason why you shouldn't," he said, considering. "There's no danger just now and it really would solve a problem for me. Very well, I pronounce you spy-in-chief to the governor. With power extraordinary to seek out and report all sedition and conspiracy against the Imperial State of Rome! "



They laughed together, and then, arms entwined, walked through the garden.

So it came about that the governor's wife, plainly dressed and veiled, with Livia her maid beside her, set out upon her curious quest. Though her spoken Aramaic still had the accent of Rome, Procla understood the language well, and she knew her Greek was perfect. The city was full of foreigners and pilgrims to the feast, so the women went their way unsuspected. They even discovered before long that an inquiry about the new prophet was not unusual. They heard others in the streets asking the same thing.

After two days of fruitless wandering about through the congested city hung with flags and banners for the coming celebration, they started out on the third morning early, guided by a vague rumour.

When they reached the New Town a crowd of feast pilgrims blocked the way. All the housetops were covered with people. Excited comments and questions were running from lip to lip.

"A procession! Coming in from Bethphage!"

"Over the Kedron bridge."

"It's the new prophet of Nazareth!"

"Who is he?"

"Jesus. They're giving him a procession!"

Procla cautiously pushed back her veil. Her heart beat fast. This looked serious and threatening. She and Livia found a vantage point on an

outside stairway and waited. Perhaps Pontius was right in being alarmed.

They could see now the outline of the moving mass of people grow more distinct along the road at the south of the Mount of Olives. It came nearer, was at last at the New Town gate. Procla had heard of the pilgrim processions on other feast years. But this was different from her imagination. Exultant voices were chanting. Men and women and children were waving green boughs. The words grew plainer.

“Hosanna! Hosanna in the Highest!

“Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord! ”

The crowd within the gate suddenly surged forward to meet the others. They caught up the chant with hysterical fervour. Procla peered over the moving heads. The central figure of the procession had at last come into view. Was passing close beside them! As she looked, Procla's hand went to her throat to stifle a spasm of sudden laughter. It was all so utterly incongruous. Against Pilate's fears of a bloody revolutionist and her own heated fancy of a warrior king, she saw instead a quiet-faced young man riding slowly on the meekest of beasts, an ass!

So this was the prophet! This was the man the chief priests thought could overthrow them. How foolish! One had but to look at him to see that he had no dangerous intentions. He was smiling

upon the children who were spreading their palm branches before the small beast upon which he rode. And then, as he lifted his eyes to the Temple Hill, a look of pain crossed his face. Procla, watching him intently, could see his eyes fill and overflow with sudden tears.

Procla stared in amazement. Tears! In the eyes of a leader? A prophet? A possible conqueror? She could not imagine Pilate's weeping under any circumstances whatsoever. Cæsar! Antony! Tiberius! Riding in a triumph, their eyes wet with tears?

This was proof enough of all she sought. She turned to Livia.

"Let us go," she whispered. "We can slip away on the outskirts of the crowd."

But as they moved down the steps a small group of Pharisees near them began to order the mob.

"Silence! Silence! Are ye all mad to shout so?"

"Who is this man, that ye should honour him like a king?"

"Silence! In the name of the law, silence!"

But the crowd was far beyond control. The chant only rose higher.

"Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord!"

Procla was interested. Here was a small reflection of the struggle Pontius had mentioned. The Pharisees were full-robed and important lead-

ers. They seemed so infinitely more than a match for the humble young prophet. She would wait a moment to see how it would end.

The Pharisees renewed their orders fruitlessly. Then one of them strode through the crowd, flinging the children carelessly out of his path. He reached the side of the small ass and its rider.

"What dost thou mean?" he snarled. "Creating an uproar! Bid these people disperse and keep silent!"

Procla saw the prophet turn and look steadily into the eyes of his enemy. She caught her breath at the level strength of the glance. He was smiling ever so faintly, but a different smile from the one with which he had looked upon the children. When he spoke his voice seemed low and yet it penetrated to the edges of the throng. It sounded like a bell with a soul, she thought.

"I tell you," he said, evenly, "that if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out!"

That was all. But the Pharisees fell back. Procla felt she understood why. In those few words there had been such a subtle and lofty irony, such a calm and dignified assurance, such a gracious championing of the warm-hearted and impetuous crowd, that the Pharisees could only appropriate to themselves the silence they had been clamouring for. They looked baffled and angry and ridiculous.

Procla was very thoughtful as she and Livia walked slowly back toward the palace hill. She had been accustomed all her life to the adept turning of a phrase. The year she had spent in Rome after her marriage had taught her the value of clever speech in a crisis. But she had never anywhere heard a remark made in a critical moment so graceful, and yet so sharp-edged and so final, as that speech of the young Hebrew prophet.

Why, when you considered it, there was no answer possible! And given as it had been with that faint inscrutable smile— To those hot, red-faced, expostulating, elaborately gowned Pharisees!

There was something compelling about this man. Something in his face, in his voice, that seemed to catch the heart. She was glad she was to see more of him.

Gradually receding, but still high and clear she could hear the children's voices behind her.

“Hos—an—na in the High—est! ”

There were guests at the palace that night and a formal banquet in the great dining-hall. When it was over she and Pilate were both tired and did not sit up later to discuss the events of the day. Procla was glad. She wished to have her facts well in hand when she laid them before Pontius.

Through the following days Procla, still veiled, was always in the group which listened in the Temple courts or in the streets, to the young prophet.

And each night as she sat in the palace that seemed so very far removed from all the ordinary life of Jerusalem she told her husband what she had heard.

"You can tell they are trying to lure him into making dangerous statements. Now, today, a smug-faced Pharisee began with the softest, honeyed voice: 'Teacher, we know thou art both wise and fearless. Tell us, is it lawful for us Jews to pay tribute to Cæsar or not?' I held my breath, Pontius. For there they all stood about him like vultures waiting for him to answer. Feeling sure he would be caught either way. But he never hesitated. 'Show me a penny,' he said. One of the men tossed one out. 'Whose is that image and inscription?' he asked. 'Cæsar's,' they all shouted. He waved it back for the man to put again in his pocket. 'Very well,' he said calmly. 'Render to Cæsar what belongs to Cæsar; *and to God*, what belongs to God!' Wasn't that a marvellous answer, Pontius?"

"Very, very clever," Pilate agreed. "And you feel sure there is no sedition in his teachings?"

"I would stake my life on it, Pontius!"

"Well, just what *do* you think of him? You are so serious when you speak of him. Do you think like some of his most ardent disciples that he is a god?"

Procla was silent a moment. Then she spoke slowly, as though choosing each word with care.



"No, I do not think he himself is a god, but oh, Pontius, I think *he has found One!* That's what he is trying to say. That's the burden of all his teaching. But the people are so stupidly, cruelly misunderstanding. He has found a greater God than the old Hebrew Yaweh and he wants to show them how to reach Him. The other day in the Temple, suddenly he stretched out his hands and cried: 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No man cometh to the Father except by me!' And behind me an old priest sneered:

" 'This man blasphemeth. He putteth himself on an equality with God.' "

Procla made a small hopeless gesture with her hands.

"Don't you see how blind they are? Why, even I, whom they would call a heathen, at least understood his meaning."

"What does he look like?" Pilate asked suddenly.

"I couldn't describe him more than I have done already except for this. Can you imagine a great crowd of people trapped in a dungeon, prisoners in the darkness? And suddenly a door opens and a man stands there telling them that he has discovered a way out—that if they'll only follow him he will lead them back to light and life? Can't you picture how such a man would look as he told them? How his face would be eager and proud and triumphant and yearning all at once? Well,



that is the way the prophet Jesus looks as he is teaching.

"Then when they do not understand, he looks at them with such sadness, such tenderness! It hurts me."

"But what about the miracles?" Pilate asked eagerly.

"That's the strangest part of all," Procla went on. "I haven't seen any and I haven't talked with anyone who has. I have heard of them only indirectly. But after I once saw the man himself and listened to him, the miracles seemed unimportant somehow, though they of course were what I really went out to see. Now I never think of them. I can hardly explain. It is as though he himself is a sort of miracle. The courage, the nobility, the purity and wisdom! They are all evident in him to such a remarkable degree. I wish you could see him, Pontius!"

"Well, I've heard nothing else now for days," Pilate smiled. "I confess I grow curious. If there is no outbreak at Passover time then perhaps I may have a chance to talk with him. I hope things stay quiet. It's Annas, you know, who is responsible for all the ferment. He's the father-in-law of Caiaphas and the power behind him. He can plot a murder and quote his sacred scriptures at the same moment. He's a crafty devil and I thoroughly distrust and despise him. I should be delighted to hear that he had been murdered some

night in his bed. Though that isn't likely, I'm afraid. Now don't look at me that way, Procla. That's a very good wish, once you know Annas. Well! It's time all early morning spies were asleep. You must not take this business too seriously, my dear. You have only another day of it, anyway. I don't want you on the streets when the feast week has begun."

But through the night as Pilate slept soundly, Procla lay thinking. It was very still in her great ornate bedchamber. Only the occasional footfall of a sentry as he made his rounds and the soft moan of the wind as it rose and sank again in the thick garden willows!

Procla lay, eyes closed, listening to a voice that seemed to echo in her heart.

"The Kingdom of Heaven is like unto a certain King which made a marriage for his son—"

"Then shall the Kingdom of Heaven be likened unto ten virgins which took their lamps and went forth to meet the bridegroom—"

"For the Kingdom of Heaven is as a man travelling into a far country who called his own servants and delivered unto them his goods—"

"And the King shall answer and say unto them, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me."

"And call no man your father upon earth, for one is your Father which is in heaven."

All these words and many more she had heard

in these last days from the lips of the young prophet. Strange new phrases. "The Kingdom of Heaven," "Your Father which is in heaven." Haunting, unforgettable. Full of a far, beckoning significance.

But the words upon which she brooded most in the night were those she had heard Jesus speak to the lawyer who had questioned him.

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and soul, and *with all thy mind!*"

It was as though he had spoken to her own baffled cravings, her own empty searchings. To love a God with your mind. That would be the end of the quest. That would be peace. But could it ever be done? Perhaps, if one really and truly found him.

This was what she longed to ask the prophet, alone; when she could feel his clear, luminous eyes looking into her own soul. He knew the answer, she felt confident. After all the excitement of the Passover week was ended she would invite him to dinner. He would surely come. And afterwards she and Pontius could talk to him and hear the truth as he saw it.

On the eve of the Passover the full moon hung like a cluster of golden fruit above Jerusalem. Soft spring airs were abroad, and through the leafy scented shadows of the palace grounds Procla could hear the tinkle of the waterfall beneath the rustic bridge.

She and Pontius stood on the long balcony that overlooked the city. Nearby they could see the old Asmonean castle aflame with lights.

"I see Herod has arrived." Pilate's tone was amused. "Trust him to do the politic thing. He has no real business here at all. He comes to try to fool the Jews into believing he respects their feast. There's his fox quality for you. He hates them all as much as I do."

Pilate walked back and forth.

"I wish this week were over," he mused. "I have a foolish foreboding about it."

Procla stood facing the gardens, her hands on the carved balustrade, her white robe trailing behind her. Her eyes were looking off at the moon that seemed to be lingering above the tiny stream.

"Oh, no, Pontius. Nothing evil could possibly follow a night like this. This is a night for feasting and love and laughter. Listen." She raised a finger.

Over the treetops on the night air came the sound of music, rising and falling, in joyous crescendo and faint, far, scattering echoes.

"It's the Hebrews singing at their feast," Pilate said, absently. "The song is something like—"

"No, don't tell me," Procla interrupted. "I don't want to know what they are singing. I only want the music to melt into the night wordlessly. That's the way it should be. All one, you know."

Shadows and moonlight and music. It really is lovely tonight. All the sweep of it—”

She raised a white arm and pointed far across the city.

“What is that square spot far over against Olivet with the lighter foliage all around it?”

Pilate came to the railing and peered in the direction of her pointing finger.

“I think that’s the Olive Garden I told you of. Where they have those tremendous old trees. Gethsemane, they call it. Why?”

“Nothing,” said Procla. “Only it looks so dark and alone somehow in all this moonlight.”

The next morning Procla woke with a feverish start. The sun was high. She had slept later than usual, for she had been strangely restless all night. Even now her head throbbed with the horrors of her dreams. She had been under heavy stress in her sleep. And she could not shake off the weight of pain. It had all been confused but terrible. Something about Pontius and the young prophet and a mob shouting and—and blood.

She got up quickly and ran across to Pilate’s door. There was no answer to her knock. The room was empty, of course. How foolish even to look for him there when he had said he would be rising at daybreak and be in the outdoor court in case of trouble.

She called Livia and began nervously to dress. There was no reason for her to be so anxiously excited. It was no wonder she dreamed about the young prophet when they had been talking of him constantly. And Pontius had been worried all along! But still—

“They are at it again, my lady,” Livia spoke suddenly as she arranged her mistress’s hair.

“What do you mean?”

“The Jews. They are making trouble again. One of the house guard told me this morning.”

“Tell me all you know at once, Livia.”

“Well, he said my lord Pilate took his seat in the judgment hall, the outdoor one, just after day-break and a great mob came shouting and threatening, bringing an accused man to be judged. He said they were more furious than that time when they revolted about the standards and banners. He said—”

“Who is the accused one?” Procla’s lips were white.

Livia stammered. “I hate to tell you, my lady. I know you’ll be sorry. I am so grieved myself. It’s—it’s the young prophet.”

Procla sprang to her feet.

“Quick, Livia. Parchment. Only a scrap. Quickly. I must send my lord Pilate a message. Oh, hasten, girl!” Her fingers shook as she grasped the pen. In a second she had written a single sentence:



Pontius: Have nothing to do with this just man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of him.

PROCLA.

"Take this, Livia, to one of the house guards. Tell him to deliver it to my lord Pilate *at once*. It is my command."

"Yes, oh, yes, my lady—" Livia had sped from the room.

Procla stood still, her hands clenched, all the vague heaviness of spirit under which she had wakened, pressing down again upon her. Something horrible impending, something in which she and Pontius were bound up together with pain and disaster!

Her mind, confused and restless, tried to steady itself. She was still living in the unreality of her dream. She must stop this foolish uneasiness. Pontius would acquit the young prophet, of course, and this mob would finally disperse as others had done. By tomorrow she and Pontius would be talking it all over safely. Times like these were hard to live through. But they passed. By noon at least Pontius should be in to tell her all about it, and she would spend the rest of the day trying to calm him and divert his mind from the vexatious happening. That was the way it had been after other uprisings. In a week's time only the somewhat bitter memory would remain.



She started with sudden fright. An echo of sudden shouting and tumult had reached her. Here in the far sheltered side of the palace. What must it be in the courtyard! What could that turbulent mob be demanding of Pontius? What could they be saying against the prophet? But Pontius would not believe them. He agreed with her about the entire innocence of the man.

Livia entered. Her face was white.

"It is in his hands, my lady. I waited until the guard came back. He says the Jews are very furious. Worse than he has ever seen them. My—my lord Pilate has just ordered the prophet scourged."

"Oh, no!" Procla cried out in involuntary horror. Then collecting herself quickly she said with dignity, "These Judæans make many hard things necessary."

She turned away and went into her sitting-room where the maid might not see the unsteadiness of her lips. *Scourged!* And by the governor's order. Oh, she could never forgive Pontius for this. Never. Her heart rose in anger against him. This brutal punishment of the prophet would make forever impossible the precious hope of learning the truth from him as she had planned. The prophet would recover from his wounds, terrible as they would be. But she and Pontius together would bear the scars of this disgraceful and unjust act. She could not forgive him for this cruelty. And after her message to him!

She sat still, cold and heartsick, hardly touching the food Livia brought her. She sat waiting until at last the door opened and Pilate entered the room. He did not come nearer. He stood looking strangely at his wife. Procla rose and faced him, and then cried out,

“Pontius! What have you done?”

For the face of Pilate was haggard and lined. And his hands, as they grasped his robe, shook.

“I couldn’t help it, Procla. I did everything I could. That devil-mob got the best of me again. I offered them *everything*—another prisoner! I told them this man was innocent. I even sent him to Herod and he sent him back to me! Finally I washed my hands before them and told them I was clear of all sin against him—”

“You washed your hands,” Procla repeated with slow scorn. “But what about your soul?”

Pilate was quiet, but Procla could see the large swelling veins at his temples, the quick breathing, the burning eyes. She knew it was taking all his self-control to speak calmly.

“I knew you would be distressed, Procla. After your message, too. But I tell you I did everything possible to save him without giving up my position and all that I’ve worked my whole lifetime to gain. How many men would do that? If you could only have heard the mob and seen their insane fury, you would understand better. ‘If you let this man go, you are no friend of Cæsar’s,’ they yelled in my

teeth. And they meant it! If I had acquitted the prophet, by tomorrow a delegation would have been on their way to Rome as they did the last time there was trouble. I know Tiberius! This time it would have meant my recall, and no further appointments. Failure."

Still Procla looked at him with faraway eyes.

"And the prophet? Will they imprison him now or did they think your scourging was sufficient?"

Pilate took a step forward, his lips twitching.

"Procla, I can't stand this. You are torturing me! I've been through enough this morning without going all over it. Don't you know what I've been trying to tell you? I've given orders *for execution*. It is for that they have been clamouring like fiends for two hours. They have taken him away now to crucify him."

Procla did not cry out. Did not move. The scream that rose to her lips died there. She swayed for a moment, overcome by a sickness of soul rather than of body. Her lips were numb.

And then as she still stood silent, Pilate's self-control suddenly gave way. He flung his hands to his head.

"I never saw anyone like him! As they led him away he turned and looked at me as though he pitied me! Gods of heaven! How did he know I needed his pity? If he had cursed me I wouldn't have cared. But *pity* from him, bleeding from

head to foot, going off to his death! I'm shaken over it. It's undone me. I'm—I'm not myself—"

He sank into a chair and covered his eyes with a nervous hand.

And then Procla spoke.

"Where is—the execution?"

Pilate did not look up.

"The place they always have them, Golgotha hill."

Without a word Procla left the room. She caught up a cloak and veil from her wardrobe closet as she passed it, and then hurried through the long palace corridor. The sun was just overhead when she reached the street.

It was late afternoon when she returned. The immobile members of the guard at the park gate showed a glint of surprise and relief as they saluted her. So did the soldiers at the castle door. In the great hall, Pilate, his face gray and drawn, was giving quick commands to his private bodyguard. As he suddenly turned and saw her he said sharply to his men,

"My lady has returned safely. The orders may be disregarded."

Then taking her hand he drew her with him along the hall and up the stairway to her sitting-room.

"Procla," he burst out when they were alone,

“where have you been? I have been mad with fear for you. With the street full of frenzied crowds and this intolerable eclipse happening just now! I have had twenty soldiers out searching for you and was just sending—”

He came close to take her in his arms. “Procla, if anything had befallen you today after all the rest of it I should have killed myself.”

Then as he raised the veil that still partly covered her face, he stepped back without touching her. He gave a low cry. For Procla’s face was white with a terrible pallor and from it her eyes burned with a light like an altar flame.

“I couldn’t tell you before I left, Pontius. You would not have permitted it. And I had to do it. It was the least thing I could do. For,” she said simply, “since I love you I must share with you the weight of this guilt. You sentenced him to death. I could only stay beside him as he died. I have been—at Golgotha.”

“No, *no!*” Pilate’s cry, at thought of it, was like that of an animal, baffled and furious and impotent.

But Procla went on, her voice low and toneless. “It was not hard to find the place. The darkness had not come on then. There were other women. We stood as close as we could. He often looked toward us. I wish he could have known who I was—understood that at least I was there—waiting—suffering with him those awful hours— One of the other women leaned once for a moment against

me. I spoke to her. Pontius, it was his mother. *His mother!* I put my arm about her—”

A shudder ran convulsively through Procla's body. Pilate stood aghast, watching her, breathing heavily.

Then suddenly the altar flame in her dark eyes seemed to burn brighter. She came nearer. Her voice vibrated in the great high-ceiled room.

“Just before he died he raised his head. The darkness was lifting and we could see his face. There was a glory on it. And he spoke clear and strong so that everyone heard: ‘Father,’ he said, ‘into Thy hands I commend my spirit.’

“At that ghastly time, when he was passing through the excruciation of such a death, he could look up into the face of his God and call Him *Father!* Pontius, don't you see what that must mean? A Father in Heaven! Not able to save His children from all pain, not even sometimes from tragedy, when all the threads of His world are so intertangled. But still their Father! Supporting them by His love. Blessing them all He can. And *suffering with them* in the extremities of their lives which He cannot prevent—

“O Pontius, there at the foot of that unspeakable cross of agony I found Him! I found my God. I seemed all at once to see the great Heart of the universe through Jesus' eyes. At the very moment of his death I caught the glimpse of a new life within me—”



She stopped. The exaltation died slowly out of her face. Her voice was piteous.

"But, Pontius, don't you see it? Don't you feel it, too? I was so sure you would understand—that we would not be divided in this—that together somehow we could wipe out our sin by worshipping the prophet's God, the One he loved. Oh, can't you—?"

She broke off, looking up at him, stricken.

He met her eyes steadily.

"I would give my right hand to bring this comfort to you, Procla. And to myself. But I cannot lie. I don't feel the reality of the God as you do. I'm afraid"—his lips twitched in a wry smile—"I'm afraid you'll have to believe for both of us, dear."

For a moment they stood, with a strange silence throbbing between them, then Procla flung her hands toward her husband.

"But you *must* feel it, Pontius! Unless your heart breaks over this it can never really heal and be whole again. Unless together we can find Him there will be no forgiveness possible. Don't you see there will be always between us and our love, between us and all joy in life, the blackness of this terrible day?"

She waited, watching his face for a sign. He shook his head despairingly, a great and wistful pain dawning in his eyes.

Suddenly she caught her breath. The light came



back to her face. Her voice was a trembling whisper.

"Pontius, I've just remembered. I know the prayer—the prayer of the prophet, the one he taught his disciples. I've known it for days, but I could not use it. Now, if we pray together, while our hearts are still sore,—I will teach you—surely, surely the God will hear us and send an answer. It's the only hope, Pontius! Oh, don't refuse me! "

The man followed her hesitatingly across the room. He stood with folded arms beside her. He had not prayed since he was a child. He was to pray now in the words of the one he had sent to death. Before them the windows looked across to far green Olivet. To Gethsemane.

"Our Father Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name."

Pilate echoed the words slowly.

"Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven."

The voice of the Roman governor faltered.

"And forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil."

Pilate's head dropped upon his breast.

"For thine is the kingdom—and the power—and the glory."

Procla's clear voice rose alone, triumphant at the end.

Pontius Pilate stood silent.

*VIII*

*THE MAID OF EMMAUS*

*"And they told . . . how he was known of  
them in breaking of bread."*—LUKE 24:35.

## VIII

### THE MAID OF EMMAUS



ASSOVER week, and a long, hard day at the inn in Emmaus! From early morning Martha had run here and there, carrying water from the spring, bringing sticks, washing the wooden bowls, sweeping under the long, benchlike table around which the guests ate, grinding more wheat and barley in the mill by the back doorway, hurrying faster and faster under the sharp commands from old Sarah and the quick blows from Jonas, the husband of Sarah.

Passover week was always busy. First there came the caravans from the north and west. These found it convenient to stop at the inn for refreshment before they began the last hilly climb which led to Mount Zion itself. Even as the week wore on there were still many travellers, coming singly and in groups, on foot and on donkeys, but going, going, always going toward Jerusalem. When the Sabbath was past they would all begin to come back, and then there would be another busy time at the inn.

But this week, in spite of the hard days and the blows that seemed somehow to grow more numerous as business increased, Martha had moved as if in a happy dream. She had scarcely seen the faces of the strangers as they sat about the table or passed by on the street; she had obeyed endless harsh directions and surly shouts quickly and mechanically, but with a look that was far away; she had heard never a word of the gossip or comment in the long inn room or around the doorway; for she, too, was planning a pilgrimage.

This evening when her work was finished she slipped out to the garden and stood under the gnarled old olive tree to live over again the wonderful hour that had made life, her miserable, abused, unloved life, blossom into a holy devotion which crowded out all else. Only a bare week ago it had happened. She had been sent on a most surprising commission. Every few months Jonas used to climb upon the small donkey that lived in the shed off the inn room, and ride to Jerusalem with a basket of provisions for Sarah's sister, old Anah, who was very poor. It seemed to Martha as if these trips used to come often, but of late they had become fewer and fewer. Jonas had stiff knees and stooped over now as he walked, and even the two-hour journey was too much for him.

So, three days before Passover, after much advice about the road and her errand and dire threats as to what would befall her when she re-

turned if she did not fulfill all the instructions, she was started off on the donkey with the baskets of food and wine hanging from the saddle, on her first trip to Jerusalem!

The wonder and importance of it! She had wished as she rode along that the way might never end, for it meant freedom, and forgetfulness of the ills that made up her days. And then Jerusalem! Somewhere back in the hazy and beautiful past before she had mysteriously become a part of the inn, there had been a mother, she remembered, who had taught her sweet songs about it and talked of its great walls and gates and of the beauty of the holy Temple there. Now she was to see it for herself.

The narrow road was often rocky and steep, but the little donkey was sure-footed and travelled steadily. At the end of two hours she was in sight of the city on its high hills, with the soft blue-green of the Mount of Olives showing behind it, and farther to the east the Mountains of Moab, like towering fortresses of amethyst and sapphire in the late morning sun.

Her road led now up the sharp ravine on the western side, through the narrow passes, and at last through the great walls of which her mother had spoken, at the Joppa gate.

Once past the soldiers with their bright trappings and in the city, the strange scenes had become a blurred confusion of beggars and shouting

merchants, of full-robed Pharisees and rabbis, and moving crowds of men and women and children.

After several frightened inquiries, she had found the Street of the Bakers where Anah lived and had given her the food and wine. Then, after she had brought fresh water and ground some meal and told her all the news of the inn, she fed the donkey, ate the bread she had brought for herself and started off again through the narrow streets, her heart almost bursting with eagerness. She was going to see the Temple!

More timid inquiries here and there, and then at last—the great stone building with its long pillared colonnade and majestic gates came into view. She dismounted from the donkey and with a hand on its bridle made her way reverently toward the sacred spot.

Within a few rods of it a group of people blocked the way. They had been listening, evidently, to a rabbi and were waiting until He should speak again. Scarcely glancing at them, Martha tried with some impatience to skirt the crowd. Then a voice spoke, and, as though it had called her by name, she stopped wonderingly. Over the heads of the people she could hear it:

“A certain man planted a vineyard, and let it forth to husbandmen, and went into a far country.”

It seemed to draw her as if a hand had reached out and caught her own. Cautiously she moved around the outer edge of the crowd, coming up at



the side, quite near to the speaker. Then she saw His face. Tired, it looked, and sad, but oh, the infinite tenderness of it! Martha watched it with starving eyes.

He went on speaking to the people, while they quieted to listen. At last he had finished. The slender young man beside Him motioned the crowd away. Reluctantly they went. All but Martha. She was waiting for the voice to speak again, with her hungry eyes on the strange rabbi's face.

Suddenly He turned and saw her standing there, one arm about the small donkey's neck. His eyes read hers gravely, then He smiled and held out His hand.

"Thou art little Martha," He said.

And at the gentleness of it she found herself at His feet, sobbing out a wordless tale of the loneliness and weariness of her life with old Jonas and Sarah. Then she felt His hands on her head, and a peace and joy indescribable came over her.

"Fear not, little Martha; thou, too, shalt be my disciple."

She raised her eyes.

"Master," she breathed, "what is thy name?"

"I am called Jesus," He said.

"*The Christ*," finished the fair young man, who still stood close beside Him.

Then she had kissed the blue and white tassels of His robe and come away, forgetting all about the Temple.

The same rocky road; the same harsh Jonas and Sarah at the end of it; the same inn with its hard duties from daylight till dark; but not the same Martha. He, the strange Master, had called her a disciple; His hands had been laid tenderly on her head in blessing.

One thought had gradually risen above all others. She longed to make Him a gift—something to show Him how much she loved Him. At first the idea brought only a sense of helplessness and despair. What had she, Martha of the inn, that she could give? She had lain awake a long time one night, watching the stars and wondering.

Then, as she sat beside the mill in the morning, grinding the wheat and barley, the idea came. She could make Him some little loaves. He had looked hungry and tired. She could take Him some bread. Oh, not the kind she made for use at the inn, but perfect loaves of the finest of the wheat. And she would go again to Jerusalem as soon as the Pass-over week was over, and lay them in His hands.

Now, as she stood under the olive tree, her brows knitted in anxious thought, for there were many difficulties in the way and there were but two days left before the Sabbath. She had discovered that over the next hill there lived a man who had a wonderful kind of wheat which made flour as white as snow. But she had learned, too, that only the very rich went there to buy. She brooded hopelessly.

Then suddenly she remembered her one possession from the fair past to which the mother belonged—a gold chain, which for some reason Sarah had not taken from her. She loved to feel it and watch the shine of the gold, but it could go for the wheat if the man would accept it.

She would do the grinding after sundown on the Sabbath when Jonas and Sarah had gone to the spring to gossip. Then very, very early on the first day of the week she would rise and bake the loaves and slip away on foot before they could miss her. She would not use the donkey, she decided. That belonged to Jonas, and this was not his errand. She could easily walk. It would all mean a frightful beating when she got back, but what did it matter if she had made her gift to the Master?

The next days, strangely enough for Martha, went as she had hoped they would. She had gone, undiscovered, with the gold chain to the man who had the fine wheat. He had looked surprised, then fingered the gold links covetously, and given her what seemed a large sackful. She had returned, undiscovered, and hidden it in the garden in a broken part of the wall beneath the oleander tree.

The Sabbath came and dragged its burdensome length till sundown. Martha was trembling with eagerness and daring. Now was the time to begin the preparations. Jonas and Sarah left for the spring, where the old folks gathered in the evenings. Martha watched them out of sight, then

worked feverishly. She took the sack from its hiding-place and seated herself with it at the mill, a shallow pot beside her to receive the flour.

She poured a few of the precious grains down the hole in the middle of the upper millstone, then ground slowly until the mill was thoroughly cleaned of the common flour still in it. Then, dusting the edges carefully, she poured more wheat and ground again, and then again and again, slowly, using all her strength upon the handle. The flour was as white as snow. She tested it softly between her thumb and finger. It was finer than any she had ever felt. It was almost worthy!

When it had all been placed in the pot she hid it carefully under a bushel measure in one corner of the inn room. She inspected the leaven, saved from the last week's baking. It still looked fresh and light. Then she went out for wood. She chose each piece with the greatest concern. Sometimes the smoke marred the loaves if the wood was too green. At last everything was done, even to selecting a fresh napkin in which to wrap the loaves and deciding upon the basket in which to carry them.

She went out to the garden and stood with her hands clasped on her breast, watching the mountains of Moab, clothed in the purple and rose of the evening. Below them lay Jerusalem like a secret thing, hushed and hidden. Not a breath stirred the bright green leaves of the oleanders along the garden wall. Not a sound rose from the village.

It seemed as if the whole world was still, waiting, dumbly expectant, breathlessly impatient, as she was, for the morrow.

When Jonas and Sarah returned Martha was already unrolling her pallet. Jonas drew the fastening of the door and they went on up to the roof-chamber where they slept.

A still, starry darkness crept on. Martha lay watching it through the small, open window. A strange stillness it was, soundless and yet athrob with mysterious anticipation as though angels might be hurrying past, unheard, unseen, but pressing softly, eagerly on toward Jerusalem.

Martha awoke, as she had prayed she might, very early—while it was yet dark. It was the first day of the week. It was her great day. In the twinkling of an eye she had slipped into her clothes, rolled up and put away her pallet and started her work. Into the clean baking-trough she poured the snowy flour, and mixed with it the salt and water and leaven, leaving it to rise while she built the fire in the oven. She moved softly, taking up and setting down each article with stealthy care. If Jonas or Sarah should wake? The fear was suffocating.

At the end of two hours the mists that had hung over the Mountains of Moab had broken into tiny feathers of cloud against the golden glory that had risen behind them. The mountains gleamed with blue and amber. Over Jerusalem the light of the

sunrise seemed to gather and spread as if, perchance, the hurrying angels of the night-time might now be risen to brood above the city with shining wings.

Martha bent over the small, low oven in an agony of hope and fear, then lifted out the loaves with shaking hands. If there should be one mark, one blemish!

But there was not. In the full light of the doorway she realized with a trembling joy, past belief, that they were perfect. All four of them. White as snow, and light and even.

A stirring came from overhead. She caught up the fresh napkin and spread it in the basket. Upon it she laid the little loaves with exquisite care, folded it over them, and then fled out of the inn door and along the street in the direction of the shining light.

When Emmaus was left well behind and she had started up the first long hill she stopped running and drew a long, shuddering breath of relief. She was safely on her way to the Master. Jonas and Sarah could not stop her now. And here in the basket were her gifts of love.

As she walked on she became aware of a new aliveness in the air about her. Every bird seemed to be singing. The very sky bent down like a warm, sentient thing. And over the steep hillsides, bright masses of anemones, scarlet and white and blue, breathed out the clear, living freshness of the



morning as if they had all just been born into bloom. Martha's heart leaped at the beauty of it. Joy gave her strength and lightness of foot. Before she thought it possible she was entering once more the Joppa gate.

Her plan had been quite simple. She would find the Master, doubtless, near the Temple where He had been before. She would wait with the crowd and listen as long as He taught. Then when the others were all gone she would go up to Him and give Him the loaves.

When she came at last in sight of the Temple there were several groups of people in the street. She approached each and scanned it carefully before going on to the next. After a second patient searching the fearful certainty came that He was not there.

She was near the entrance of the Temple now, pausing uncertainly. One of the chief priests was walking back and forth along the corridors. She went close behind him.

"Hast thou seen Jesus, the Christ?" she asked timidly.

The great man started violently. His face was ashy grey. One arm shot threateningly toward her.

"Why askest thou *me?*" he shouted. "*Speak not that name to me! Begone!*"

Martha trembled with dismay as she ran away from the Temple and down the next street. What



could the gentle Master have done to anger the priest so?

She continued her search. Everywhere people hurrying about their duties; here and there groups excitedly talking; but no sign of the rabbi and the young man who had stood beside Him. It was noon and Martha was hungry and tired. She must ask again or she would never find Him.

Two soldiers passed. She feared them, yet respected their power. Perhaps they could help her. She cautiously touched the arm of the one nearest her.

"Dost thou know where the rabbi Jesus is. They call Him the Christ."

The soldier looked at the other and laughed a strange, mirthless laugh. It pierced Martha's heart with a sense of impending doom.

"Hearest thou that?" he said loudly. "She asks us if we know aught of Jesus—we who helped crucify Him the other day."

From Martha's bloodless face her great dark eyes met the soldier's, agonized. He paused and spoke a little more softly:

"Thou hast the truth, child. He was crucified three days ago on Golgotha Hill. Devils they were who ordered it, but so it fell. Thou hast the truth."

They passed on. Martha leaned, sick and fainting, against the wall. *Crucified! Dead!* And in her basket were the little white loaves for Him.

And He would never know. His hands would never touch them. The gentle Master, with only love and pity in His face—crucified! And the loaves were white as snow . . . perfect . . . to show her love for Him.

At last she roused herself and dragged her way wearily toward the Joppa gate.

A woman was sitting sadly in a doorway. She had a sweet, patient face, and Martha halted, her heart lifting ever so little. One more inquiry; the soldiers might have been mistaken.

“Didst thou know—Jesus?” she asked softly.

For answer the woman’s reddened eyes overflowed. She rocked herself to and fro.

“And I trusted,” she moaned, “that He was the redeemer of Israel. Some say today that He is alive again, risen; but it is only an idle tale. For I saw Him”—her voice sank to a choking whisper—“I saw Him die.”

Martha moved slowly on, the woman rocking and moaning in the doorway.

The afternoon sun was hot now, and Martha’s feet were heavy. The deep dust of the road rose to choke and blind her. The sharp stones tripped her and cut her feet. The way back was endless, for now there was no hope. She thought wearily of the freshness and joy of the morning. There would never be such beauty and happiness for her again. She stumbled on—and on.

When she reached the inn, at last, it was late

afternoon. She was about to enter the main door when she caught her breath. No, she *could not* surrender the basket to Jonas and Sarah. Better to crush the little loaves in her hands and allow the birds of the air to have them.

She set the basket down beside the eastern door—Sarah rarely went out that way—then went to the front of the inn. With a shout they were both upon her.

“Thou shalt be taught to run away!” old Sarah cried. “Thou shalt be taught to go to Jerusalem without leave! Thou wast seen! It was told us!”

The blows came, as she had known they would. She had no strength to resist. She lay where she had fallen, beside the oven—the oven where only at daybreak she had laboured in ecstasy.

At last Jonas snarled: “It is there thou shouldst lie. It is there thou dost belong, under people’s feet. But, hearken to this! If any shall come, thou shalt rise up and serve them. The caravans have long since passed, but if there should come a belated traveller rise up and serve him! Or thou shalt receive . . .”

He was still shaking his great fist as they went out.

Martha lay still. Soon, darkness; but not as of last night, filled with angels. Dead, despairing, empty darkness, tonight. She closed her eyes.

All at once there were footsteps along the street. Voices were talking earnestly. She recognized one

of them. It was that of Cleopas, the rich vineyard owner. He always stopped at the inn on his trips to and from Jerusalem. A hand opened the door.

"Abide with us," she heard Cleopas say eagerly, "for the day is far spent."

Then they entered: Cleopas and his brother Simon, and another—a stranger, whose face was in the shadow.

Martha had risen with infinite pain and now set about placing the food upon the table. She brought the barley cakes and oil, the wine and the raisins, and the meal was ready. Then she stopped. Just outside the eastern door was the basket with its precious offering—the gift of love that could not be bestowed. Here were three men, weary from their journey and hungry.

The struggle in her breast was bitter but it was brief. She opened the door and lifted the basket. From their napkin she took the four loaves and placed them before the stranger, who sat in the shadows at the head of the table. Her eyes, dim with tears, watched the loaves as they lay there, snowy and fair. The longing love of her heart; the gold chain, her one treasure; her aching limbs; the swelling bruises on her poor beaten body; all these had helped to purchase them. She raised her eyes to the stranger's face—Then, a cry!

It was as though all the colour of the sunset and the radiance of the morning had united behind it. And out from the shining, majestic and glorified,

yet yearning in its compassion and love, *The Face*, but not that of a stranger, appeared.

He was gazing steadfastly upon the little loaves. He touched them, broke them, extended them, and raised His eyes to heaven, while the blinding glory increased.

Cleopas and Simon were leaning forward, breathless, transfixed. Martha had crept closer and knelt within the circle of light.

"Master," she tried to whisper. "Master . . ."

He turned and looked upon her. No need to speak that which was upon her heart. He knew. He understood.

Gently the radiance enfolded her. Upon her shone the beneficent smile, fraught with heavenly benediction and healing for all earth's wounds.

Then, as softly as the sunset had gone, the celestial light died away. The Master's chair was empty.

Cleopas and Simon sat spellbound, gazing at the place where the splendour had been. Martha still knelt in a rapture of joy and peace.

On the table lay the little white loaves, uneaten, but received and blessed.









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